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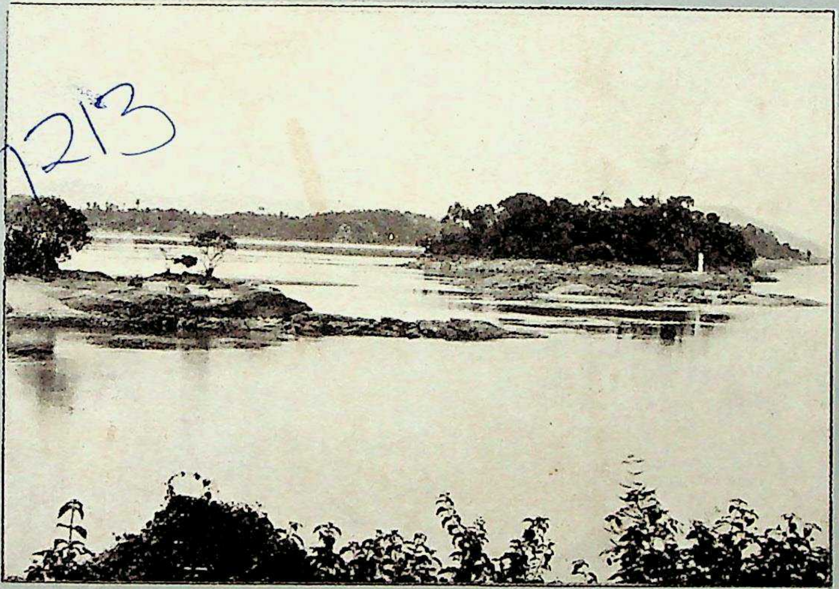
of
THE HERITAGE OF ASSAM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INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS

TWENTY-SECOND SESSION
GAUHATI

1959

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RECEPTION COMMITTEE
INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS
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FOREWORD

Assam has a rich legacy of culture and civilization behind her. Being the homeland of different races of men : Austric, Mongolian, Dravidian and Aryan that came to dwell in her hills and valleys at different times since remote antiquity, she has developed a composite culture of variegated colour and of great intrinsic value. The variety and diversity in her cultural life are noticeable in the language and literature, religious beliefs, manners and customs, dance and music of her people in the hills and plains.

Assam has also to her credit some works of art of no mean value in the realms of sculpture, architecture, epigraphy, literature and painting. The 'Buranjis' of Assam which are unique historical works of the Ahom period of her history have attracted the attention of historians, both Indian and European. The dynastic history of Assam from the fourth to the beginning of the nineteenth century also presents an almost unbroken story of the rise and growth of this frontier State of India.

It is a matter of great pride for Assam that the historians of India have assembled in her soil at Gauhati on this memorable occasion of Twenty-second Session of the Indian History Congress Association. I have great pleasure in commending to them this Souvenir Volume of the Session as brought out by the Reception Committee, and I trust the volume will be useful in giving a brief view of Assam's heritage in some of its essential aspects.

Dated Shillong,
December 20, 1959

(B. P. CHALIHA)
Chairman, Reception Committee.
AND
Chief Minister, Assam

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Assam and India

By

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THE province of Assam is at the extreme North-East of India, and although it is the sentinel of India in its North-Eastern Frontier, it has never been cut off from the rest of India. As a matter of fact Assam, from very ancient times, has always been regarded as having participated in the affairs of Northern India, which was the heart of the country, and where Indian Civilisation took shape. While being an integral part of India and sharing in the general life and culture of the country, Assam has, like all other component elements within the Unity that is India, its own special characteristics—its own particular *cachet*, so to say.

In the first instance, if we look into the physical features of Assam, we have to note the great riverain valley of the Brahmaputra, which is one of the most majestic rivers of the world ; and to the North and South and East of this fertile Brahmaputra basin, we have the regions of the mountains and hills.

The population of Assam in its composition has all the basic elements which go to make up the modern people of India. There are the Austric or Austro-Asiatic elements, the Dravidian elements, the Indo-Aryan, and finally the Indo-Mongoloid elements. Just as in the extreme South of India the Dravidian element is preponderating, so in Assam (as much as in North Bengal and much more so in Nepal and the Southern Slopes of the Himalaya Range), the Indo-Mongoloid element forms the most dominant one in the population. The Mongoloid peoples of India, speaking various languages and dialects of the Sino-Tibetan language-family, appear to have started to come into India through the Eastern and Northern gates of the country from over 3000 years ago. In their various tribes and bands, they came and settled down in the sub-Himalayan tracts and even came down to the plains of India, particularly in North Bihar and North Bengal and East Bengal and in the Brahmaputra valley ; and, besides, the outlying hill regions of Assam were fully occupied by them, excepting that in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills we have a people pre-dominantly Mongoloid in race, but Austric in language. This basic Mongoloid element, which gives the tone to the population and culture of Assam, consists in the plain lands very largely of the Boḍo tribe, which is closely related to the Naga and the Mikir to the East and South of the Boḍo area. In the North, there are in the NEFA territories Abors and Miris and Akas and Daflas, who came under the suzerainty of the Ahom kings of mediaeval Assam centuries ago. The Boḍos, as a Mongoloid tribe, at one time appear to have formed a solid *bloc* of a Mongoloid people throughout the whole of North Bihar, North Bengal, East Bengal and the Brahmaputra valley, with extensions in the Cachar Hills, the Garo Hills and in the Tripura Hills. Local Austric and Dravidian elements were in possibility absorbed by the Boḍos. Here they also accepted North Indian Gangetic culture with the Brahmanical religion, it would appear, fairly early.

The Boḍos who early became Hindus evidently created history for Assam for the first time as they entered into the community of Hinduised or Hindu nations in the centuries before Christ. In the *Mahābhārata,* the historical nucleus of which appears to go back to the middle of the 10th century B.C., a king of Assam of those days, Bhagadatta, came with his hosts of *Kirāta* and *Cīna* troops—and these were tribes of the Mongoloid people, golden and yellow in colour ; and Bhagadatta himself took part in the *Mahābhārata* battle as an ally of the Kauravas. Bhagadatta was, according to the *Mahābhārata* saga, a very powerful chief who used to fight from the back of an elephant ; and after performing various feats of valour, he was killed by Bhīma, the second of the five Pāṇḍava heroes. The ancient dynasty of Assam consisting of Hinduised Boḍos, with possible Aryan and Dravidian as well as Austric mixture, *were* described in the *Purāṇas* as belonging to the family of Narakāsura, the *Asura* or demon or non-Aryan chief Naraka, who was looked upon as the son of Vishnu by the Earth Goddess. It would appear that the family of Bhagadatta, as scions of the Narakāsura House, continued to rule over Assam, right down to the middle of the 1st millennium A.D.

We do not have any direct evidence of happenings in Assam from the time of the *Mahābhārata* right down to the time of Bhāskara-Varmān, the king who belonged to the Brahmān caste according to Hiuen-Ts'ang, and who was a very powerful monarch ruling over Assam during the first half of the 7th century A.D.

There is no reason why we should not consider Bhagadatta as representing actually an historical person, if we concede that there is a historical core to the *Mahābhārata.* During the period of time extending over one millennium, from 1000 B.C. onwards, a silent Aryanisation of Assam was evidently taking place. The Indo-Mongoloid peoples had come to India even prior to the arrival of the Aryans. In the *Yajur-Veda* we find references to the Kirātas who lived in the hills, and a Kirāta girl is described in this Veda as picking medicinal herbs by the slope of the Himālayan Mountains. *Kirāta* appears to be the name by which the Aryan-speakers knew the Indo-Mongoloid people, and the people over whom Bhagadatta ruled are also described as *Kīrāta-Cīna ;* so that we may say that even from pre-Christian times the Kirāta or Mongoloid peoples of Assam, like the Boḍos, were linked up with Northern India.

Assam formed the Eastern gateway of India ; and just as the

Western gateway led to Iran and Central Asia and the lands of the West, so Assam was our high-way by land into China. Probably from the early centuries before the Christian era, Chinese art-manufactures used to come to India through Assam, as we can see from the evidence of the Chinese general and explorer Chang Kien, in the second century B.C. At that time, India used to import bamboo-flutes and silk stuffs (and possibly also other articles) from China, and would export these to Central Asia. The connexion between Assam and Northern India, the heart of Āryāvarta, began, it may be, from the beginning of the first millennium B.C.; and it became very close as early as the 7th century A.D., from the evidence of both Hiuen-Ts'ang and Bāṇa-Bhaṭṭa. In Bāṇa's *Harṣa-Carita,* Bhāskara-Varman, or Kumāra, the King of Assam, who was contemporary with Hiuen-Ts'ang, was a very close friend of Harsha-Vardhana of Kanauj, who was at the time the virtual emperor of the whole of North India. On the occasion of Harsha-Vardhana's coronation, Bhāskara-Varman sent a number of very valuable presents, which included, among other things, beautiful silk stuffs and other art-products of Assam, besides a most remarkable umbrella which was an ancient heir-loom and an outstanding example of old Assam craftsmanship which has been described in detail by Bāṇa-Bhaṭṭa. From after that time, Assam's history can be chalked out with a fair amount of detail, and we can form some idea of Assam's connexion with North Bengal, with Nepal and with the lands further to the West.

Assam is the land of the Brahmaputra; and Assam forms one of the important areas in which the Saiva Tantrics have divided India and South-Eastern Asia and Indonesia. The Aryan language from Bihar and Bengal passed into Assam, and there by about 1000 A.D. it became the Aryan Assamese language, more or less in its present from : the Assamese language is very closely connected with Bengali, and one would think that Old Assamese and Old Bengali formed an identical speech. The Bodo peoples were gradually giving up their language and taking up this Aryan Assamese. The traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism (and to some extent of Buddhism) were very strong in Assam. The native pre-Hindu myths, legends and historical tales of the Assamese people were absorbed by Puranic Hinduism. Assam was one of the centres of Tantric religion and philosophy and of Tantric cults and ritual, particularly Brahmanical; and the great shrine of the Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā in Kāmarūpa in Western Assam is a place of pilgrimage of all-India celebrity.

Assam also became linked up with the rest of India through the reconstruction of Indian History which we find in our *Purāṇas*. Not only Bhagadatta was connected with the *Mahābhārata* heroes, but we have also the *Purāṇa* story which is well-known all over India and which is believed in implicitly by large sections of the Indian people, that the Asura King Bāṇa who belonged to the family of Naraka and was ruling at Śoṇitapura ("the City of Blood"), which is now identified with the little town of Tezpur —(it should be noted that, in modern Assamese, the Sanskrit word *tejas* meaning "energy, or heat" has become *tez*, which now means "blood"), had a beautiful daughter Ushā, and Aniruddha, one of the grandsons of Krishna of the *Mahābhārata,* and Ushā fell in love with each other. Aniruddha was imprisoned by Bāṇa, and then Krishna went with an army from Dvārakā in Gujarat, and defeated and brought Ushā as the bride of his grandson Aniruddha. I heard a tradition in Gujarat that Ushā brought to her husband's home some dances from her own native place Prāgjyotisha or Assam, and among these dances, which developed in Gujarat, is the famous *Garbā* dance. Thus we may see that in a way a close cultural connexion between the extreme West of India and the extreme North-East had been assumed from fairly early times.

In Assam, a great many pre-Aryan names have been Aryanised. The country had two Sanskrit names in ancient times : the first was *Prāgjyotiṣa,* the exact significance of which word and its origin is not known. The other and later name is *Kāmarūpa,* and Kāmarūpa is specially connected with Western Assam, where on the Nīlāchala or "the Blue Mountain" the shrine of the Mother-Goddess, Kāmākhyā, is established ; and this shrine is in a subterranian cleft in the rock. The word *Kāmākhyā* (or *Kāmākṣā*) has been explained as being of Austric origin, by the eminent linguistic scholar of Assam, the late Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, in his very valuable book on the "Formation and Development of the Assamese Language." The Brahmaputra river has two names—*Lauhitya,* which is evidently a Sanskritised form of the Tibeto-Burman name *Luhit.* The word *Lauhitya* gives good enough meaning in Sanskrit as "the Red River," but it is in all likelihood just a Sanskritisation of the pre-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan name. The other name of the river, which is now better known, is *Brahmaputra,* and it means "the son of Brahmā", and that is quite within the orbit of Sanskrit nomenclature. But, as Sri Vishnu Rabha, a well-known writer of Assam, who is a member of the Boḍo community, has suggested, the word is just a Sanskritisation of a Boḍo expression, *Bhullum-buttur,* which means "flowing with a gurgling sound", which would easily give a form like *Burum-buttur,* and its transformation into Sanskrit *Brahmaputra* would then be very easy.

Assam did not have any occasion to expand her military prowess over the rest of India. But at one time, in the 7th century, Bhāskara-Varman of Assam appears to have extended his conquest as far as Murshidabad district in West Bengal. The history of Assam from after the first quarter of the 13th century (1228) right down to the end of the 17th was largely the history of the expansion of the power of the Ahom rulers at the expense of the earlier Boḍos (who were settled in the country and were already a Hindu people in Assam within the orbit of a Brahmanical society) and also at that of the other hill tribes. Little by the little Ahoms established their rule over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, and even into the hills to the South and North ; and it was only natural that they should give their own name to the whole area : the word *Assam* or *Asam* is another form of the tribal name *Aham* or *Ahom,* which are modifications of the original name of the Ahom people, *Rham.* This name, as that of the dominant, ruling power from the 14th century onwards, gradually made the earlier names almost obsolete, and these earlier names remained only in Sanskrit. The name *Kāmarūpa* became in mediaeval times modified to *Kāwaṃru* (कावँरू) and in Bengali *Kāṅur* or *Kāwuṃr* (काङुर, कावुँर); but the name *Assam* (*Asam*) became generally accepted all over India, particularly during British times. The Ahoms were a Sino-Tibetan people belonging to the great Dai or Thai (or Tai) group; and the people of Laos, the Siamese, as well as the Shans of Burma, and the Khamtis of the Burma-India frontier, as well as the Ahoms, are related tribes belonging to the same great Dai or Thai people. The Ahoms gradually became Hinduised, and their Hinduisation started with very great vigour from the 16-17th centuries, and it was accomplished by the 18th century. Now they have become members of an important caste among Hindus in Assam, all of them speaking Assamese, their original Ahom language being almost entirely lost. The Boḍos, on the other hand, have kept up to a large extent their tribal identity by maintaining their language, although this language has been dispersed in several detached pockets—in Kachar (both hills and plains), and in the Chutiya area to the north of the Brahmaputra, and in the Central and Western districts of Assam, as well as in North and East Bengal, where they are found as Rabhas, Meches, Rajbansis and Garos (within the Garo Hills), as well as Hajongs and as Ṭipras in Ṭripurā. (The Ruling House of Tripurā is of this Ṭipra clan or tribe, but they had merged within the fold of Brahmanical culture and religion many centuries ago).

We need not discuss in detail the early political history of Assam. But we cannot dismiss Assam's connexion with the rest of India without making a reference to the Mogul invasions of Assam. When Bakhtyar Khilji, the Turki leader who conquered Western Bengal in 1203, came to Assam with an invading army and suffered defeat at the hands of the Assam's ruling house, which was evidently a Hindu Boḍo House, he noticed that the people of Assam and North Bengal, who were known as Koches and Meches, looked like the Turks,—that is, were Mongoloid in their features. Assam maintained her separate independence all through, and although the Moguls invaded Assam from the 17th century onwards, they were not able to retain a firm hold over the country for any considerable period of time. In the 16th century, as a contemporary of Emperor Akbar, arose a great ruler who combined North Bengal and Assam into one powerful state. He was a Boḍo, and a strong champion of Hinduism, —orthodox Brahmanism and Sanskrit culture, and his name was Nara-Nārāyaṇa, who was one of the most illustrious and puissant sovereigns of India, and a great fighter as well as supporter of learning and culture. About 1563 he built the temple of Kāmākhyā near Gauhati (Guwāhāṭī) in Assam, which still exists. His chief General was his brother Chilā Rāy, or "the Kite King", who was so called because of his blitz tactics in war. The days of Nara-Nārāyaṇa, the Koch or Boḍo King, were certainly great in the annals of Eastern India. During the time of Aurangzeb, the Moguls made a determined attempt to conquer Assam and were to some extent successful. But a succession of Assam's Rulers with some very clever Ministers and brave Generals like Lāchit Barphukan ultimately drove the Moguls out of Assam. The credit of doing this finally belongs to Gadādhar Siṃha, the Ahom King, who was also known as Su-pāt-phā, to give his Ahom name. His wife Jayamatī Kunwārī is a paragon of wifely love and devotion in Assam, because of the cruel death which she welcomed when her husband as a young prince was fleeing from his enemies, and Jayamatī Kunwārī sacrificed her life rather than divulge the secret of her husband's whereabouts to a rival group which was bent on destroying him. The son of Gadādhar Siṃha and Jayamatī Kunwārī was a very famous ruler of Assam and Easter India, Rudra Siṃha alias Su-khrung-phā, who could be described as "the Sivaji of Eastern India." He was a great patron of arts and letters, and he was also a great military organiser, and a conqueror who had brought the Kachar and Jaintia hills under his sway. Rudra Siṃha wanted to form a confederacy of the Hindu States of Eastern India —Tripurā in East Bengal, Vishnupur in West Bengal, and Morang in South Mithila, besides some of the great feudal lords of Bengal and Bihar like the Houses of Burdwan and Nator. His idea was to drive the Moguls out of Eastern India and re-establish Hindu régime, and his objective in that was to prevent the Muslim ruling class from interfering with the Hindu religion and bring about all kinds of disabilities upon the Hindus. He entered into direct negotiations with the powerful Hindu kingdom of Tripurā, and he was preparing a huge army with arms, ammunitions and stores. But the Tripurā House suffered from internal disorder and revolution; and Rudra Siṃha himself met with an untimely death in 1714 A.D., and that terminated his attempt at forming a confederate Hindu State in Eastern India.

After driving out the Moguls, Assam went on its own way, but was rather disturbed by internal religious dissensions and rebellions during the 18th century. Then the Burmese came and conquered Assam, and the Burmese gave to the Assamese people a very bad time. The East India Company in Bengal came into friendly relations with Assam, and after the First Burmese War the British annexed Assam and made it a part of the Indian Empire. Assam was for the greater part of the 19th century rather in the background. But this century saw the intellectual and cultural integration of the Assamese upper classes with Bengal and the rest of India. In Assam's Roll of Honour some great names, which have added lustre to Indian History and Civilisation, are to be found. In the modern age Assam has given a scholar like Anundoram Borooah, I.C.S., who was a great Sanskrit scholar. Assam's literature began its career early, and the greatest name in Assam's literature as well as in Assam's history is undoubtedly that of Śaṅkara-Deva. He was a saint and sage who lived for 120 years, and he brought about a great religious reformation in Assam based on *bhakti* or faith in Vishnu as the One Supreme Divinity. With the advent of Śaṅkara-Deva, Assam's literature flourished in an unprecedented manner, and at the present day the Assamese people are quite proud of their language and literature which is keeping abreast of the other modern literatures of India. Assamese literature is remarkable for its *buranjis* or chronicles, which were inspired by the Ahom custom of maintaining histories. The word *buranji* itself is of Ahom origin, and the rich *buranji* literature of Assamese started from the 17th century. In India's economy, Assam has a noteworthy place —the silk and tea of Assam are two of the great commercial assets of India, particularly tea, which is largely exported abroad. In the textile art, Assam has made a distinct contribution, particularly in her beautiful silk weaves. Assam's old school of miniature-painting, which has not been very much studied, is also unique in its character. There are some beautiful Assamese manuscripts from the 16th century onwards, and those which belong to the 17th and 18th centuries have given us detailed realistic pictures of the Ahom Courts in Assam.

After Independence, Assam has once again come to her own. In the Central Parliament in Delhi, Assam has contributed her quota of politicians and statesman. In their life, the Assamese people still maintain a good deal of the old Indian simplicity—Assamese ladies even now keep to the art of weaving as an accomplishment. But in integrating herself with the rest of India and with the civilised world, Assam is marching ahead with the other States and Peoples of India.

The Back-Ground of Assamese Architecture

By

RAJ MOHAN NATH, B.E., TATTVA-BHUSHANA

The Primitive Type

ACCORDING to the great Epic Mahābhārata and the Kālikā Purāṇa, the most ancient race of people who ruled over the Brahmaputra Valley with an organised form of Government was the Kirātas. Though the Kirātas have been described as cave-dwellers in the Śukla Yajur-Veda (XXX—16) and as snake-charmers in the Atharva-Veda (X—4.14), during the Epic period they are described as rulers of different kingdoms in different parts of Asia from north of Tukhara and Cina to the valley of the Lohita river and also in different principalities in the Himalayan terrain upto the west coast of Beluchistan (Vana-Parva—Ch. 176, Sabhā—Ch. 25, 29, 31).

Of all the tribes of Assam, the Kāchāris who had ruled in different parts of Assam from time immemorial to the middle of the Nineteenth Century A.D. are traditionally known as the Kirātas. Ruins of several of their ancient cities with sculptures and architecture peculiar to their culture have been discovered in several sites in Assam and it is possible to form an idea of their primitive art from them.

According to the Atharva Veda, the common house was built of bamboo posts on raised up bamboo roof frames covered up with grass—"*Sthūnāmadhiroha vaṃśogro virājan xx tṛṇaṃ vasānā*" (AV. III—12.5.6) the number of roofs being either two or four "*catuṣhpakṣha ochadiḥ*" (AV. III—7.3). According to the Rigveda while the poor man lived in the mud-house—"*mṛnmayaṃ gṛhaṃ*" (VII—89.1), there were others who had a good house with a permanently fixed roof,—"*dhruvaṃ chardi*" (VII—74.5) long and wide enough with one thousand doors—"vṛhantaṃ *mānaṃ sahasra-dvāraṃ gṛhaṃ*" (VII—88.5), some of which were so high that the rays of the Sun rising in the East could barely reach their pinnacles —"*practīcyāgādadhi harmebhyāḥ*" (VII—76.2).

The roofs of the two-roofed or the four-roofed thatched building of the common man must have had slanting or curved roofs in the areas where the rainfall was naturally heavy as in Assam. It may be mentioned that Lord Buddha prescribed five types of buildings for occupation by his disciples : *Vihāra, Ardha-yoga, Prāsāda, Harmya* and *Guha.* Of these *Ardha-Yoga* implies the two-roofed or *do-cālā* building which according to Buddha was also called "*Suvarṇa vanga-gṛha.*"

A specimen of a rock-cut temple of the Kāchāri king of the 16th century A.D. has been found at Māibong, on the bank of the Mahur river in the North Cachar Hills District. Carved out of a huge rock of black sand-stone with a fairly commodious plinth area of rectangular dimension, The temple was designed to house the tutelar war-goddess *Raṇacandi* or *Mahāmayā* of the Kāchāri king.

Later on, when the Kāchāri king shifted his capital to the valley of the Barak river at Khaspur in the plains of the Cachar District near Silchar, the same goddess was housed in a building enclosed with thick brick-walls and roofed over with four-planed curved roofs. The design and construction of this roof was ingenious : Pan-tiles 3 ft. to 5 ft. in length were made with baked earth, in the shape of a half bamboo with its internodes scooped out. Two such tiles were placed side by side longitudinally along the slope of the roof on timber rafters with their concavity facing upwards and over the longitudinal joint was placed another similar tile with its concavity downwards. Joints were flushed with lime and surki mortar. This alone was sufficient to prevent rain-water from percolating down into the room below. As a sufficient further pre-caution the whole roof of tiles was covered over with a thick plaster of lime and surki beaten down slowly. This made the building completely leak-proof The poor Kāchāri people living in the hills still adopt this method of roofing their houses with pan-tiles scooped out of bamboos which grow abundantly in the hills.

The Vaishṇava shrines in the western part of modern Assam still house the deity in a rectangular room with carved roofs of the same pattern as the *Raṇacandi* rock temple at Māibong and call it '*Bhānj ghar*'.

The term *Vanga Gṛha*' or *Banga Gṛha*' as used by Buddha Ghosha, and from which the English word 'Bungalow' appears to have been derived, has been construed by some scholars as referring to Bengal, the houses of the common people of Bengal being designed with such curved roofs. But apparently, the term has been derived from the '*Bhānj-ghar*', the word '*Bhānj*' meaning bent like the snapped branch of a tree or like the familiar '*Bāng*', the curved and bent pole for carrying loads on the shoulder. The fact that the term '*Bhānj-ghar*' is still in common use amongst the Assamese people, specially with reference to the house in which the god of the Vaiṣṇava Satras is housed, is perhaps ample proof in support of the argument. A '*Bhānj-ghar*', freshly thatched with the common 'uloo' grass, assumes a golden colour, this being the natural colour of this variety of the thatching grass and it is with reference to the newly thatched '*bhānj-ghar*' that Buddha-Ghosha evidently used the term '*suvarṇa banga gṛha* while explaining the '*Ardha Yoga*' house meant for the occupation of Buddhist monks.

The classical period

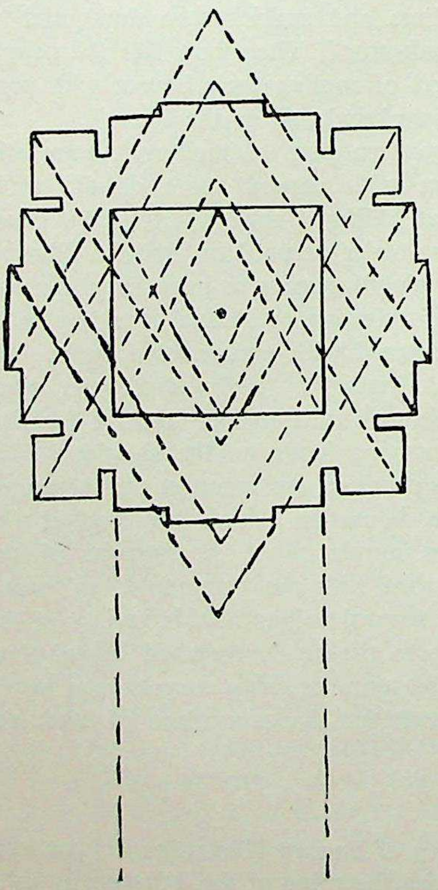
The classical period of the history of ancient Kāmarūpa commenced by the middle of the 4th century A.D. with the reign of the Varman dynasty (350-654 A.D.). Apart from a few copper-plates of Bhāskara Varman (593-650), the only other dependable records of archaeological value of this dynasty are—the Umācal Rock inscription near Gauhati of Surendra Varmā (alias Mahendra Varmā—480-500) and the ruins of a temple with a rock inscription at Baragangā, Mikir Hills, of Mahābhuti Varman (520-560). The latter site contains a few specimens of sculptures of excellent workmanship and the general layout of the temple is also fairly undisturbed though architectural specimens have been ruffled. After the Varmans the Śālstambha dynasty (otherwise known as the Mleccha dynasty) ruled in Assam (655-985) and they were great builders. All the buildings are in ruins. The next dynasty was the Bhauma Pāla (985-1130). They too were great builders. Except for one temple which is somehow standing up even to this day on the Siddheśwari hillock at Śuālkuchi in the Kāmarūpa district all other buildings are buried under ruins.

The plan

From what has been gathered so far from the sites of old temples whether in ruins or in sites, some of the temples of later times having been apparently constructed on ancient plinths, it appears that the general lay-out of temples by the Kāmarūpi architect consisted of :—

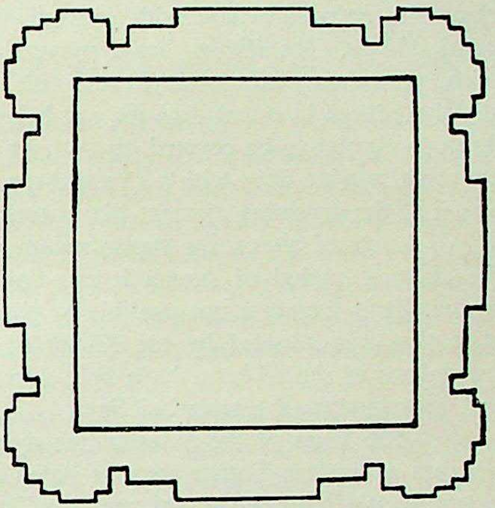
(1) Gateway situated at some distance from the main temple on the approach road, (2) *Mandapa* or *Nāt-mandir* (Assembly hall), (3) *Go-puram* or Entrance chamber and (4) *Garbha-gṛha* or the sanctum-sanctorum.

In some minor temples only one deity was housed and the structure consisted only of the *garbha-gṛha* with an enclosed yard in front of it. In other cases every temple was provided with accommodation for four other deities apart from the main deity, making the *panca-devatā* pantheon. While the main deity was housed in the main *garbha-gṛha*, the four companions were housed in small temples constructed as annexures in the four corners of the main temple. In some cases as at Rājbāri-Yogijan at Hojāi and at Mikir-Āti near Dobokā, Nowgong, the four companion deities were housed in separate temples constructed in four corners of the yard of the main temple.



GROUND PLAN

The *garbha-gṛha*, the womb and the house of the embryo, the small inmost sanctuary with its usually square plan—'*caturasra*' had the main shrine or *vimāna*, the sky-scraping chariot constructed over it with '*śikharas*' of various designs. The square plan appears to have been based on the *Sṛṣhti Cakra* or the *Śrī-cakra* of the *Śakti-cult*—a combination of nine triangles—four pointing upwards and five pointing downwards with a common centre of gravity. Corners and sides were worked out from this *Śrī-cakra*. It may be noted here by the way that even in the 16th century A.D. the whole Vijayanagara city in the Deccan was laid out on the plan of the *Śri-Cakra*.



DETAILS OF CORNERS

Super structure

The *Vimāna* or the sky-scraper is the general structure over the sanctum-sanctorum or the recess of the god's habitation. This is compared to the cave or *guhā* of the human heart, the seat of *citi* or consciousness or of *prāṇa*, the vital energy which is both the breath and the dynanism of the cosmos. From the conception of the seat of the *citi*, the Buddhist used the term *Caitya* for the sanctum sanctorum. The *Vimāna* is therefore considered to be a chariot in which the soul is the master, the body is the chariot, the intelligence is the driver and the mind is the rein—

> "*Ātmānaṃ rathinaṁ viddhi śarīraṁ ratham eve tu,*
> *Buddhiṁ tu sārathiṁ viddhi manaḥ pragrahameva ca.*"
> (Katha Upanishad—1-3. 3)...

The *vimāna* therefore being a replica of the human body has its *pāda* (leg), *janghā* (thigh, waist), *kāndha* (neck) and the *śikhara* (the peak-crown). The last item i.e. the *Śikhara* is the main structure round which all the architectural craftsmanship were concentrated by architects according to their ideas and conceptions with local variations—and thus different types of temples derived their architectural nomenclature.

Of the various types, three are the most important :—(1) *Nāgara*—the North India type, a square base, *śuka-nāsā* (bird-beak), *śikhara* with a tower gradually inclining inwards in a convex curve i.e. a curvilinear tower finishing to a point or apex which is covered up with an *āmaloka* (the well known fruit) over which is placed a *kalasa* (pitcher). On the top of the *kalasa* is placed the metallic insignia peculiar to the god or the goddess i.e. a *triśula* or a *cakra*.

(2) *Vesara*—The South Vindhya type, usually from the south and of the Vindhya upto the bank of the Kṛṣhṇā river ; circular, ellipsoidal,

apsidal or square base with invariably a round circular dome as the *śikhara. Vesara* actually means a nose-ornament of $\frac{2}{3}$ rds. moon-pattern.

(3) *Drāviḍa*—South Indian style—hexagonal, octagonal—regular or elongated, or square base with generally octagonal and occasionally hexagonal *śikhara.* The *śikhara* has a pyramidal elevation consisting of a multiplication of storey after storey, each with a replica of the sanctum-cella and slightly reduced in extent than the one below. The tower does not necessarily finish to a point to be covered up with an *āmaloka* as in *Nāgara* or *Vesara,* but remains wide open with a rounded-top garret called the *stupikā, stupī* or *topī,* i.e., the crowning element like a turban or *pugree.*

As stated above, the superstructure of none of the ancient temples of the classical period of Assam is standing up except only one of the Pāla period. It is therefore not possible to judge exactly what was the common style that was adopted by the Kāmarūpi architects, except from whatever facsimilaes of the *śikharas* have been carved out in some of the architraves and bresummers of temple buildings.

The kings of the Śālastambha dynasty with their capital at Hārup-peśwara at modern Tezpur were as stated above, great builders. A frieze of a temple at Gharpurā-chupari near the Tezpur town contains facsimilaes of three *śikharas* carved in bold relief. They are clearly of the *Vesara* type.

King Harṣha Deva (730-750) contacted friendship with the king of Nepal by giving his daughter in marriage with the latter. The next king Vala-Varma—(750-765) offered his daughter Amṛt-prabhā in marriage with the king of Kāśhmir. The Kāśhmir king requisitioned the services of a Buddhist saint Stuna Pā from Kāmarūpa capital to teach Buddhist rites to his subjects who lived in Tibetan borders within Kāśhmir. Evidently there was a Buddhist shrine and organisation near about Tezpur in those days.

Twenty seven miles west of the modern Tezpur town and about six miles to the south of the Assam Trunk Road is the Nij-Barcholā village containing ruins of an ancient city. In one of the sites, a huge stone architrave contains three dimensioned bold reliefs of three Buddhist *Caityas* of the Nepāli temple pattern, three *Bodhi* and two *Nyagrodha* trees. The Bodhi trees are of the Bharhut type.

It may be mentioned here, that while Gautama Bhuddha attained divine light under the *Bata* or the Bo-tree, his predecessor Buddha Kāśyapa attained the light under a *Nyagrodha* tree. The *Nygrodha* or the *Nica-śākha* (because of the roots growing out of branches going down to the earth and again growing up as trees like the mother-tree) tree was sacred to a sect of people who were opposed to Vedic rituals in the early Vedic period and they were known as the "*Naicā-Śākhas*" with a stronghold in Kikata or Magadha (North Bihar)—(Vide Rig Veda—III-53.14).

The next dynasty that ruled over ancient Kāmarūpa were the Bhauma Pālas (1000-1130 A.D.) of whom Ratna Pāla, the Great, had his son Purandara Pāla married with Durlabhā, a princess of the Bhoja dynasty of the kingdom of Vidarbha of South India. The Pālas brought a large number of sculptors and architects from South India and literally littered the kingdom with sky-scraping temples and palaces the pinnacles of which flashed with the ambrosia-emitting smiles of beautiful damsels—

> "*Samada sundarīsmita sudhā-dhavalita saudha-śikhara sahasrān*".
>
> (Ratna Pāla's Bargaon Copper plate, para. 16).

In the outskirt of the Śuālkuchi village on the north bank of the Brahmaputra about 18 miles to the west of the Gauhati town stands the Siddheśwari temple on the top of a fairly high hillock, commanding a clear view of the whole surrounding country with the mighty Brahmaputra meandering through it. The main temple is constructed of old style bricks with intermediate stone architraves and chaukats. The temple has somehow survived the onslaught of time and earthquakes and though neglected and covered up with vegetation growth is standing somehow still to this day, exhibiting its ancient architectural beauty.

The *Śikhara* consists of a dome with the *Vesara* background, the top has no *āmaloka* but is finished with a finial which is very much like a miniature *stupī* of the *Drāviḍa* school. The two images placed in front of the maindoor having been displaced from their original positions—the one of Mahiṣha mardinī with a rounded stele, and the other of Sūryya with a conical stele are evidently specimens of South Indian sculpture. The hair-knots of Sūryya's consorts Chāyā and Saṃjñā are definitely of the Drāvidian pattern.

The capital of the Pālas was at Durjayā Nagara very likely at Rājbāri near Yogijān in Hojāi, Nowgong District where the extensive ruins of vast temples—one main and four subsidiary with an imposing gate house on the bank of the Yogijān lake, clearly testify to its ancient glory. The main *kalasa* of the main temple with some specimens of architectural floral designs is still lying scattered about.

The whole of the Kapili and the Yamunā river valleys of the Nowgong District as has been stated above were littered with temples as testified by finds of a large number of ancient sites, with innumerable ruins. Two architraves found amongst the ruins of the ancient shrine at Kāwai māri village on the south bank of the Yamunā river, depicts six *śikharas* with fluted faces of the Nāgara type. Similarly, a frieze at Mahādeośāl near Dharamtul on the north bank of the Kapili river has fac-similaes of five temples with Nāgara śikharas. The frieze at Ākāśī-Gangā near Pārokhoā on the north bank of the Yamunā river depicts fac-similaes of two temples of the same pattern.

The Koch Period

The shrine of the Great Mother Kāmākhyā on the top of the Nīlācala hillock about 2½ miles west of the Gauhati town on the south bank of the Brahmaputra river, is rich with hoary traditions. In Copper plate grants of the classical period, the goddess has been named 'Mahā Gaurī; and except for the find of the 5th century rock inscription of Surendra Varmā, alluded to above, in the Umācala Āśrama on the eastern slope of the Nīlācala hill, no other finds of ancient architecture is available. Only a few stone slabs of pārśvadevatās now embedded in the panels of the present structure are believed to have been recovered from old ruins as some of them are exact replicas of similar images found in other ancient sites, ascribed, according to a stone inscription embedded in the inner wall of the temple to Śukladhwaja, the brother and general of the Koch king Nara-Nārāyana (1540-1587) in 1565 A.D.

The general lay-out of the temple follows the ancient Kāmarūpi style : the plan conforms to the *Śrī-Cakra* and from the outer end there are respectively the *Nāt-madir* or *Mandapa,* the *Gopuraṃ* and the *Garbha-Gṛha.* Each one of them has a *śikhara* raised on its top.

The illustration (Plate No. I—fig. 1) shows the general view of the temple with all its adjuncts. The slanting roof with a rounded-off cave in front is a subsequent addition on the side door approaching the *Gopuraṃ.*

It also gives a clear view of the main *sikhara* dome on the top of the *grabha-gṛha,* with *śṛngas* or peaks grouped in the lower courses of the *śikhara,* each in continuation of a buttress or off-set of the perpendicular wall of the prāsāda. These miniature *śikharas* are known as '*Tilakas*'—devotional nose-paint marks.

The question arises—of what type is this *Śikhara* of the Kāmākhyā temple ? It is neither *Nāgara* nor *Vesara,* but evidently a combination of both. Apparently it has the Siddheśwari temple of the Pāla period (described above) as the model though a local variation has been made by lengthening its height. If any nomenclature is at all necessary, it must be called the '*Nīlācala type.*'

On the same hillock, a few hundred yards south of the Kāmākhyā temple stands the temple of Goddess Tārā, designed and constructed in the same pattern with an imposing gate on the approach road to the temple.

The Umānanda temple on the Peacock island in the midst of the Brahmaputra river east of the Kāmākhyā hillock is sacred to Śiva, the consort of Mahā Gaurī and is an adjunct to the Kāmākhyā shrine. The temple however, has a Śikhara of different type more or less cupolic in form with vertical flutes. It is believed that the old temple having had collapsed due to earthquake, the present temple was constructed by an Ahom King of the later period—in 1694 A.D.

Śukladdwaja's son Raghu Rāi who after the death of his father separated from his uncle and established an independent kingdom, constructed the Hayagriva Mādhava temple on a hillock at Hajo on the north bank of Brahmaputra, about 16 miles west of Gauhati. Some ancient sculptures bearing similarity with those found in other parts of Assam clearly testify to the fact that in very ancient time there had been several important temples in this area, and in the very site of the present temple. Raghu Rāi's architect followed the same principle of general lay-out of the temple and its adjuncts, but the *Śikhara* is of an absolutely different type with pyramidal plane faces finishing to an apex point (Plate II—fig. 3).

The Ahom period

After the Koches, the Ahoms who gained mastery over the eastern portion of the ancient Kāmarūpa empire were the greatest builders in Assam. Though originally hailing from northern Shān States with ancient culture of their own the Ahom kings later on embraced Hinduism of the Śākta cult with a zeal that prompted them to devote a good portion of their revenue to construction of temples in honour of Śiva and Durgā.

Plate No. II—fig. 5 shows the great Śib-dole temple at Śibsāgar town on the bank of the great Śibsāgar tank with the main temple *Gopuraṃ*, the *Mandapa* and the gate. The Śikhara is a modified Nāgara, the Śuka nāsā curvilinear faces, however, are fluted with vertical lines. The main śikhara is surrounded by fac-similaes of the main śikhara hugging the chest in its lap in quarter half and three quarter depths. This kind of hugging śikharas is called '*Uramanjari*' (*Ura* lap, chest ; *manjari*—spring of corn or flower as in the *tulasī* plant). This is a common feature of temples in Northern India and Bengal.

The Devī-dole temple at Gaurī Sāgara in the Śibsāgar District, shows the *tilakas* and a clear view of the *Gopuraṃ* with the *Bangagṛha* roof with bricks.

The top of the temples, however, does not contain the *familiar* '*āmaloka*' in the standard pattern, instead a tier of gold-plated '*kalasas*' in gradually diminishing sizes is placed on a solid circular base made of bricks.

The Devī temple on the bank of the Joysāgara tank is of the same pattern as the Śibdole temple.

Some specimens of Ahom palaces and court buildings, all constructed with bricks are still standing up and each one of them is a style in itself with architectural designs peculiar only to Assam.

Fig. No. 9 in Plate No. IV is the '*Talātalighar*', the underground cellar palace of the Ahom King at Rangpur, three miles west of the Sibsagar town.

Another palace is the four-storeyed '*Kāreng-ghar*' (or the royal palace) at Gargaon near Nazira about 9 miles to the south east of the Śibsāgar town. (Plate IV—fig. 8).

The two-storeyed '*Rang-ghar*' or the pavilion stadium in the parade ground at Rangpur is also worth notice (Plate No. III—fig. 7).

All the above buildings were constructed between 1700 to 1750 A.D.

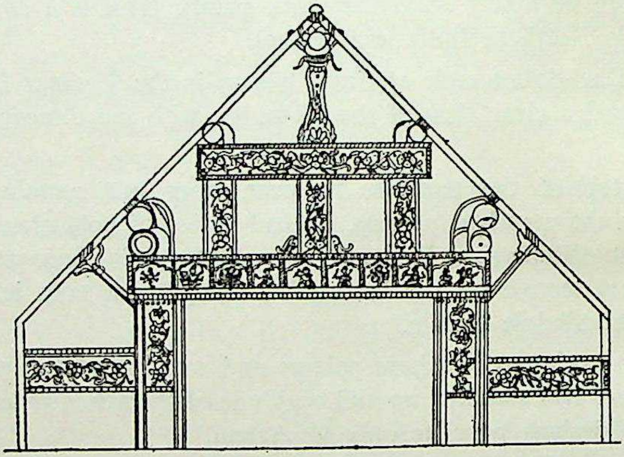
About the same time the Kāchāri king at Khaspur who came in contact with the Ahom Court improved the architecture in his capital and perhaps with the help of masons of Rajputana side constructed the '*Snān mandir*' or the bathing temple for the deity, in the Aihola pattern with a *Vesara* dome adorned with śajyās (chajja) i.e. cornices all round the dome (Plate No. II—fig. 4)

The Muhammedans who gained mastery over the western part of Assam since 1594 to 1654 A.D. inspite of frequent troubles and political reverses that they had to meet with in the hands of the Ahom kings of Upper Assam built a mosque and a town at Rangamāti in the Dhubri sub-division of the Goalpara District on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

Plate No. III—fig. 6 shows the mosque at Rangamāti ascribed to Hussain Shah—1594 A.D.

The Satra School

"Satra", the Vedic word meaning an institution for perpetual dissemination of holy thoughts and teachings has been in use in Assam at least from the 16th century A.D., being applied to the centres of Vaishṇava teachings. The headquarters of the Vaishṇava *gurus* were known as Satras. These Satras inspite of various political turmoils that the country had been from time to time subjected to, managed to retain the traditional culture of the country in their precincts. The country having had lost good craftsmanship in stone work, the Satra artists took to indigeous products—the timber, bamboos and thatching grass to give vent to their ingenuity in sculpture and architecture.



TIMBER ROOF FRAME OF KIRTAN GHAR, KAMALABARI SATRA

The sanctum sanctorum as has been stated above was called the *'Bhānj-ghar'*, and also the *'Maṇikuṭa'*. This was constructed as a separate house either with two curved roofs or with four flat roofs. In front of the sanctum sanctorum was constructed a big *mandapa* known as the *'Kīrtana ghar.'* This was a very commodius building 50 to 100 ft. wide and 100 to 200 ft. long with wide verandahs on two sides parallel to the length. The roof of the huge *Kīrtana-ghar* was covered with thatching grass on bamboo roof frame which was supported on a timber queen truss constructed with timber with artistic design. This huge truss was supported on timber pillars 9 to 12 ft. in circumference placed at a distance.

The two roofs were of the *docālā* pattern but the front of the house was provided with a rounded slanting roof of the same pattern as the vestibule in front of the *Gopuraṃ* of the Kāmākhyā temple. The ridge of both the *Kīrtana-ghar* and the *Maṇikuṭa* or the *Bhānj-ghar* was invariably finished with a round-roofed garret over it called the *stupī* or the *tupī*. In design and nomenclature the influence of the Dravidian architecture is clear.

In front of the *Kīrtana-ghar* a few hundred feet away from it and its approach road was constructed the '*Bāt corā*' or the gate house invariably a two roofed small building without any walls.

The Sculpture of Assam

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MATERIALS on which a discussion about Assam sculpture may be based, with some degree of confidence, are meagre. Despite this deficiency, a study of the plastic art of Assam is not altogether out of question. There are valuable references and authentic evidences as to the existence of sculptural and architectural activities in Assam long before her invasion by the Ahoms in the middle of the 13th century of the Christian era.

Assam sculpture falls into the category of the fourth school according to Gopinath Rao, who says : "Viewing broadly the conditions and characteristics of Hindu sculpure, it may well be said that there are four different schools representing four different regions of India... The fourth school, which resembles closely to the third in respect of ornamentation and grouping, is chiefly represented by the sculptures of Bengal, Assam and Orissa. It is at once recognised by the human figures therein, possessing round faces, in which are set two oblique eyes, a broad forehead, a pair of thin lips and a small chin"

Late Sree R. D. Banerjee, while compiling one of the most valuable volumes of the Archaeological Survey of India, namely 'Eastern India School of Mediaeval Sculpture, included almost all the important specimens of Bengal and Orissa art of the period concerned but unfortunately he did not refer to a single specimen of Assam sculptures though at least a few of them richly deserved a reference from his learned pen in the aforesaid monumental work. Scholars like K. N. Dikshit, Director General of Archaeological Survey of India (now deceased) have highly appreciated some of the Assam Sculptures belonging to the period under reference.

Early period

The finest and the oldest specimen of sculptural or iconoplastic art in Assam is the temple stone door-frame at Dah-Parvatia, in the district of Darrang (Central Assam). Its carving is characteristic of the style of early Gupta Schools of sculpture. The two goddesses, Gangā and Jamunā, stand with garlands in hand in artistic pose and elegant posture. The door jambs are decorated with beautiful ornamental foliage. The artist's sense of proportion, the beautiful symmetry of the figures and ornamental devices, and the excellence of execution tend to prove that this door lintel belongs to the same period as the great schools of sculpture which existed at Pātaliputra and Benāres in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. It has been well observed by late K. L. Barooah, author of the *Early History of Kāmarūpa,* that the temple must have been built in the fifth or sixth century A.D. by a predecessor of Bhāskaravarman, the most powerful Kshatriya king of ancient Kāmarūpa of the 7th century—a contemporary and worthy ally of the celebrated Harsavardhana, the emperor of mid-India.

The other relics of historical importance and artistic beauty, discovered in the Darrang district, namely the Bāmuni hill ruins, the sculptural remains now lying in the Cole Park and the Missionary compound have been described at length by scholars in the respective reports of *Archaeological Survey.* These remains have been dated back to the 9th-10th century A.D. Of these finds, the highly striking specimens are the two massive ornamented stone pillars now adorning the gate of the Missionary compound at Tezpur, Darrang District.

"The most remarkable sculptures of the first group are two shafts of pillars. . . . The shaft of one of these pillars is sixteen-sided, the upper end being ornamented with a broad band having 'Kīrtimukhas' at the top and the lower with dentils. Over this band the shaft is round and appears to be lathe—turned like the upper parts of the Western Chālukyan Columns of the Bombay Presidency."—R. D. Banerjee.

At Gauhati and its neighbourhood carved images have been found in abundance. The huge rock-cut Vishnu Group at Sukreswar, the Anantaśayī Vishnu at Aśvaklānta on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, the rock-cut figures near the Gauhati Water Works and in the Urvaśī island depict the masterly skill of the sculptor. Besides, the sand-stone Natarāja Śiva, the Nṛittyarata Gaṇapati, the black stone images of Vishnu, Brahma, Indra of the 10th-11th century A.D., the metal images of Vishnu and Durgā, now preserved in the State Museum at Gauhati are but few examples of fine specimens of Assamese iconoplastic art so far unearthed in this eastern-most State.

At the Kāmākhyā hill located at the distance of about three miles from the town of Gauhati—a well known Mahātirtha—a good number of sculptures of archaeological interest, dating from the 8th to the 17th century A.D. have been found. A few of them have been preserved under the provisions of the *Ancient Monuments Act.* A special reference may be made to the stone gateway that dates back to the time of Naranārāyana, the famous Koch King of the 16th century A.D., the rebuilder of the temple of Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā. The doorway has a pointed arch and the wall surface is decorated in places with lotus medallions and heraldic looking lions on either side of the gate.

At Nowgong district (Central Assam) especially on the Davakā side, ruins of the 10th-11th century A.D., have been discovered and described at length by Sri T. N. Ramachandran, (Ex. Joint Director General of Archaeology in India) in the annual report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1936-37. Of the Davakā finds the image of Umālingana-mūrti appears to be the most artistic and this neatly carved image is now decorating the State Museum of Assam.

The Numaligarh ruins in the Sibsāgar district (Upper Assam) described by the same scholar in the same report deserve mention in this connection. The ruins are of a Siva Temple dated back to the 10th-11th century A.D. A few of the finds have been removed to the museum of which the most striking one is the frieze with a row of busts with hands holding lotuses, tiara on the head, a big 'tilaka' mark on the forehead and with a sweet smile in the face. "No visitor can go back without falling in love with these smiling faces", said late Dr. Benimadhab Barua.

Another sculpture found in the same district and now preserved in the Museum is the famous Deopāni Vishnu image bearing an inscription in corrupt Sanskrit verse. The contents of the inscription have been brought to light by late Rao Bahadur K. N. Dikshit, who attributed it to the 9th century A.D. on palaeographical grounds by correcting Dr. Bloch's estimate of date.

A collection of huge stone images was long lying in the premises of the Sub-Divisional Officer of Sibsāgar, Upper Assam. They have been assigned to the tenth-eleventh century A.D. Only a few years ago, these valuable sculptures have been removed to Gauhati at a considerable cost and the images of Gaja-lakshmī, Varāhavatāra, Kāmadeva, Saraswatī and so on are now adorning the Assam State Museum. These images are believed to be the remains of a Vishṇu temple which possibly existed in the vicinity of their find-place. This ancient Vaisṇava temple was, in all likelihood erected by the Kāmarūpa Kings of the tenth or eleventh century. It is interesting to note that even till the eleventh century the Kāmarūpa Kings exercised their rule as far as the easternmost corner of the Assam Valley. "The affinities of Assamese art would seem to lie more with the schools of Bihar and Orissa than with the contemporary Pāla art of Bengal. This is not unnatural as of the streams of influence that have moulded the culture of Assam, the strongest current has always been from North Bihar and Mid-India."—K. N. Dikshit.

A number of terracotta plaques were discovered while clearing the jungles at Dah-Parbatia. The best examples of terracotta plaques, known at present which can be relegated to the Gupta period were found in 1926 at Dah-Parbatia, in the Darrang district of Assam. They show the nice poise and the naturalism of human figure. A reference may be made to the carved tiles discovered by late Dr. T. Bloch in Bhismaknagar, near Sadiya (NEFA), which have been described in type as 'Indian and only too common in mediaeval Indian Art', but 'peculiar' in design. Of the late mediaeval period, a good number of interesting terracotta plaques have been discovered in Goalpara district (Lower Assam) and now preserved in the Assam State Museum. The dancing and hunting scene and also the lively figure of the fighting bull stand out most prominently. These plaques may be assigned to the 17th century A.D. Ruins at Sree Sūryya Pāhār (Goalpara district) are also of archaeological interest. The site contains a good number of rock-cut figures of which the images of Durgā, Siva and Manasā deserve special mention. They may be dated back to 9th-10th century, A.D.

The kingdom of Prāgjyotisha was quite close to Uttara Kosala and Magadha, where Buddhist influences reigned supreme. It is surprising that Prāgjyotisha or ancient Kāmarūpa was free from such influences, yet it was something like a paradox. Yuan-Chwang said that in the seventh century the people of Kāmarūpa worșhipped the 'Devas' and did not believe in Buddhism. Briefly speaking, there were a few Buddhists in ancient Kāmarūpa, who were respected by the king and Buddhism did actually exist in the country but did not flourish to a wide extent. This is evident and borne out by the fact that there are only a few specimens of Buddhist sculpture so far discovered in Assam.

Ahom period

Plastic art in Assam degenerated to a considerable extent during the Ahom period that ranges from the 13th century till the advent of the British rule. Why? It is evident that art lacked royal support and sympathy until the Ahom rulers turned full-fledged Hindu converts. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the Ahom kings wanted to build or rebuild Hindu temples, the Assamese sculptors of the time could hardly do their jobs with credit. The result was that the sculptures carved out were not on a par with those of the early period. The fine images mounted on some of the Ahom temples, were stated to have been recovered from old ruins of the pre-Ahom period.

The specimens of sculptural and architectural skill of Ahom period are to be found in abundance in Sibsāgar (Upper Assam) where they had their capital for a long time. The Ahoms ruled successfully in Assam for about six hundred years.

In the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries they erected palaces and lofty temples which attract the attention of an archaeologist and quite a few of them have now been protected by the Archaeogical Department under the provisions of the *Ancient Monuments Preservation Act*. The palaces are well decorated and the walls of the temples are inset with icons of various denominations. The lofty and the magnificent temples erected by the Ahom rulers, though seen in profusion in the district of Sibsāgar, also exist in small numbers in other parts of the State. Clay models of such architecture, such as of Kāmākhyā temple, Kāreng-ghar (palace) Rang-ghar (amphitheatre), Śiva Dóle (Siva temple) and so on have been preserved in the Museum.

Archaeological exploration or excavation of systematic and scientific nature has not yet been undertaken in Assam. The present collection consists of what may be called chance-finds from the upper stratum of the earth and from tanks, ponds, pools, ditches and so on. Even then, it may be safely concluded that sculptural or plastic art of skill and merit was not unknown in the early history of Assam.

Kamarupi Systems of Ayurveda, Astrology and Almanac

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KAMARUPA is to the students of Indian culture not merely a geographical expression or a political unit but has also been a spiritual and living entity; many Brāhmaṇical works, the *Purāṇas* and the *Tantras* bear eloquent testimony to this historical fact. Its cultural pattern has been moulded in a way that has given it a stamp of independent character, though it is to be admitted that in the evolution and development of all cultural aspects, Kāmarūpa maintained close connection with the general Indian trends. This could be possible because there has been frequent flow of cultural ideas from one part of the country to the other; geographical frontiers of Kāmarūpa stretched far beyond the present limits of Assam almost in all directions, particularly towards the west, and scholars, due in a large measure to the patronage of the pre-Āhom and Āhom rulers, visited and settled permanently in the land and helped in the diffusion of India's traditional lore among the people, whether Aryan or non-Aryan, Hindus or non-Hindus. We have ample evidence of the progress made by the people of this land in varied cultural fields throughout the centuries, and we have definite traces of their cultural activities in different aspects, substantiated by inscriptions, notes of the foreign visitors and wealth of old manuscript treasure, written in both Assamese and Sanskrit languages. It should be stated that the rulers, irrespective of their origin, contributed greatly towards the advancement of the spiritual and temporal needs of the people in general, and they, with the co-operation of a vigorous nation of diverse peoples, could maintain a prosperous and independent State, the like of which is hardly to be found in the long annals of Indian history. In fine, the cultural achievement of the people of this ancient land has been in the main due to the royal patronage.

Kāmarūpa was always a noted centre of Brāhmaṇical learning. As stated by the Chinese pilgrim, Yuan Chwang, in the 7th century A.D. during the time of the Kāmarūpa king Bhāskaravarman, "men of high talents visited the kingdom."—(Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travel in India,* II, 185f). The biography of the pilgrim records that a learned scholar from Kāmarūpa went to the Nālandā University to engage in a religious controversy with the Buddhist scholars there.—(*Life of Yuan Chwang,* 161-65). Some well known celebrities of India are associated with this land. It is believed that Kauṭilya, whose knowledge of Kāmarūpa was so intimate—

commentators of the *Arthaśāstra* refer to Kāmarūpa in connection with many industrial products—hailed from eastern India or probably from Kāmarūpa.—(*J.A.R.S.*, VII, 83-86). Viśākhadatta, the writer of the *Mūdrārākṣasa,* who was patronised by the Kāmarūpa ruler Avantivarman, is said to have belonged to Kāmarūpa.—(J. C. Ghosh, *J.P.A.S.B.*, XXVI, 241-45). Abhinavagupta, a Buddhist scholar of the 9th century A.D. belonged to Kāmarūpa, and it was undoubtedly because of the reputation of the land that Śaṅkarācāryya came here to engage with him in a religious controversy.—(C. N. K. Aiyar, *Sri Śaṅkarācāryya—His Life And Times,* 56). Kumārila Bhatta, another noted Brāhmaṇa scholar, may have belonged to Kāmarūpa. —(*Ibid,* 26). Most of the Tantrik-Buddhist *siddhas* including Mīnanātha hailed from Kāmarūpa, and they were largely responsible for establishing close contact with Tibet, Nepal, Gauḍa, Orissa and other parts of India. Scholars from Kāmarūpa were equally honoured by the contemporary rulers. The name of a Brāhmaṇa, Viṣnusomācāryya from *Śṛṅgāṭikāgrahāra* of the *Kāmarūpa viṣaya* occurs in the grant of the Gaṅga king Anantavarman of Kalinga (A.D. 922). Among the twenty-six donees, to whom the Paramāra king Vākpatirāja donated lands, some were from Kāmarūpa.—(*E.I.*, XXIII, 109). It is evident, therefore, that there has been frequent exchange of learned men between the neighbouring kingdoms, and with the expansion of the political sway of Kāmarūpa, at least a large portions of Eastern India came under the cultural influence of this land. —(N. N. Vasu, *Social History of Kāmarūpa,* III, 13f). This accounts for the cultural progress obtaining in the land which must have drawn the attention of scholars from all over India. Our treatment of the subject of cultural heritage will, however, be confined to a few aspects.

Both epigraphy and literary evidence prove that *vidyā* and *kalā* were studied by the people, provisions for which were made in the curriculum of studies at the *gurugṛhas* and the *ṭolas. Vidyā* includes the four Vedas, the upa-Vedas, including the *Āyurveda,* the Vedāṅgas, including different branches of *jyotiṣa,* etc. In ancient India the beginning of the science of *Āyurveda* goes back to antiquity. In the *Atharvaveda* and the *Kauṣītaki Sūtra,* for instance, we find mention of medicinal herbs and of the art of healing. The Buddhist works mention topics concerning medicine. Patañjali speaks of the *Vaidyaka.* There are references to the study of the science in many Brāhmaṇical treatises. The earliest references to a written work is the *Saṁhitā,* ascribed to Caraka, who, according to traditions, was the physician at the court of the Kuśāṇa king Kaniṣka. The next important treatise is that of Suśruta, and certain Nāgārjuna is said to have worked over Suśruta's treatise. We are concerned with one Nāgārjuna, but we have in Indian traditions more than one Nāgārjuna, and their dates have not been satisfactorily established. Indian, Chinese and Tibetan sources seem to have mixed up traditions with genuine history and do not appear to have distinguished between Nāgārjuna, the propounder of the Mahāyāna doctrine with Nāgārjuna, the famous alchemist and also a Tantrik *siddha.* According to Weber, Nāgārjuna who revised the *Suśruta Saṁhitā,* flourished during the second century B.C.—(*History of Indian Literature,* 287). As known from historical sources, one Nāgārjuna, the originator of the *Madhyamikā* doctrine and the author of the two noted works, the *Mādhyamikakārikā* and the *Suhṛillekhā,* was the contemporary of the Kuśāṇa king Kaniṣka.—(*The Age of Imperial Unity,* 144-47). According to a tradition, recorded in the accounts of Yuan Chwang and confirmed by I-Tsing, another Nāgārjuna lived in a monastery built by Aśoka, lying to the south of the capital city of Dakṣiṇa Kośala, ruled by a Śātavāhana ruler, who was probably Yajñaśrī Śātakarṇi whose dates fall in the second century A.D. The Mahāyānist Nāgārjuna, according to a prophecy recorded in Buddhist literature, was born some 400 years after the *mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, and if this event took place in 483 B.C., the period of activities of the former is to be ascribed to the first century. This Nāgārjuna was born at Vidarbha and became for sometime the head of the Buddhist *saṅgha* at the University of Nālandā.

Besides these, there was definitely another Nāgārjuna, a Tantrik *siddha* and an alchemist, whose name is associated with Kāmarūpa. According to the Tibetan work *Pag Som Zon Zang,* Saraha or Rāhula was born at Rājñī in Kāmarūpa. Scholars like Grünwedel and G. Tucci hold that Saraha was a Śūdra from Kāmarūpa.—(*J.P.A.S.B.* (NS), XXVI, 133-41). He is said to have converted one Ratnapāla, a Kāmarūpa ruler, and both of them might have flourished towards the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century A.D. His disciple, probably a native of Kāmarūpa, was Nāgārjuna, mentioned by Alberuni who states that the former flourished about one hundred years before his time. He is associated with two *sādhanās,* one for *Vajrayāna* and the other for *Ekajaṭā,* identified with *Mahācīna Tārā,* whose cult is said to have been recovered by Nāgārjuna from Tibet.—(*Sādhanāmālā,* 193f). His important Tantrik work is the *Booddhicittvavivarṇana.*—(P. C. Bagchi, *I.H.Q.*, VII, 1-16, 740-41). M. M. H. P. Śāstrī found the manuscript of a medical treatise, entitled *Yogśataka* in Nepal. The work, with one hundred prescriptions, is attributed to Nāgārjuna, and his remedies are taken to be efficacious even today by the village medicinemen of Assam. In the Kāmarūpī Āyurvedic pharmacopoeia there are certain specific prescriptions which are associated with his name. —(*J.A.R.S.*, II, 44-51).

Local records mention physicians who must have practised Āyurvedic treatment. The word *Vaidya* occurs in the Śubhaṅkarapāṭaka grant of the king Dharmapāla of the 11th-12th century A.D., and it is significant that the grant was composed by the *vaidya* Prasthānakalasa.—(*Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī,* 146f). Like the present day *ojāhs,* the word stands for a professional class rather than a caste name, as in Bengal. Records of other parts of India also prove the existence and important position held by the *Vaidyas* as early as the 8th century A.D., if not earlier.—(*E.I.*, VII, 317-21 ; XVIII, 291-309 ; *I.A.*, 1839. 57f). The Nowgong grant of the king Balavarman III again mentions *Bhiṣaja* as a class of physician.—(*J.A.S.B.*, LXVII, 1, 99f). His functions are known from the texts. The *Brahma*

Purāṇa quoted by Aparārka, states that *Bhiṣaka* or *Bhiṣaja* lived by surgery and attended upon patients. We have ample evidence to show that during the Āhom rule there were separate departments under trained officers and physicians to look after and prescribe indigenous medicine for patients, both human beings and animals. The practice of Āyurvedic treatment is also substantiated by the extant manuscripts on the subject, some of which have now been preserved at the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies at Gauhati. The science of *Āyurveda*, it may be stated, is based on what is known as *tridoṣa—vāta, pitta* and *kapha*; and these trio are taken as the sole supporter of the entire body. Their physiological and pathological conditions are the root cause of existence or dissolution of the body; when they are normal, the body is alright, and when abnormal, diseases appear. Physicians are, therefore, advised to recognise the actual state of these *doṣas* :

(*doṣāḥ punastraya vāta, pitta, śleṣmāṇaḥ/te prakṛti bhūtāḥ śarīropakārakāḥ bhavanti vikṛtimāpanāstu khalu nānāvikāraiḥ śarīramupatāpayanti/*)—*Caraka*, 1-5.

It may be true that Kāmarūpa did not produce men like Caraka and Suśruta, but at least some of the existing manuscripts are found to have been based on their *Saṁhitās*. These are the *Āyurveda Śāstra* and the voluminous *Vaidya Sāroddhāra* in Sanskrit language and Assamese script with 121 folios, composed by one *Jagannātha Śarmā*. On palaeographic grounds both the manuscripts may be ascribed to a fairly early period. Here we have detailed discussion on the Āyurvedic treatment with particular references to the *tridoṣas*, and hence these treatises may be taken as scientifically composed works on *Āyurveda*. Another valuable Sanskrit work is the *Cikitsā Saṁhitā* with 19 folios by Śrī Dāmodara. It begins with an invocation to Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Śiva and deals with the *tridoṣa*. The *Vaidyavatī*, an Assamese work on *Āyurveda* with 27 folios deals with the various symtoms of fever and prescribes medicinal herbs for treatment. The work begins with an invocation to Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Dhanantari. It describes the treatment of ordinary fever as follows :—

jvarara lakṣaṇa—gā nāghāme, save gā dukhāi, gā poḍe, gā tapat. (Symtoms of fever :—no perspiration, pain all over the body, it burns and there is temperature).

Advice :—Do not take anything for 8 days.

Medicine prescribed :—*mānimuni, viriṇā śipā, lāl candana, citāmūla* and *ādā*, all these are to be pasted in equal proportions, mixed with water and then to be taken in two *tolās* a dose.

We have some other manuscripts on indigenous medicine, viz, the *Cikitsā Grantha* in Assamese with 13 folios and the *Vyādhi Gusivar Kathā*. Another important medical work is the *Cikitsā Mantra Tantrādi* in Assamese with 21 folios. The treatise begins with an invocation to Gaṇeśa and Dhanantari and describes symtoms of different kinds of tumour, carbuncle, boils, etc., and prescribes medicinal herbs for these diseases.

It should be noted in connection with the Āyurvedic treatment in Assam that this science and the healing mantras have been considered as almost inseparable, or that in spite of the extensive use of medicinal herbs, major part of the healing of patients is believed to have been done by incantations, a reference to which is found to have been made at least in some works. The origin of this idea may, however, be traced back to many early texts, and the intimate connection between the two—the herbs and the healing mantras have been so ingrained in our nature that the patients do not feel relieved of their diseases unless a reference is made to *Kāmarūpa—Kāmākhyā* in a Tantrik style and also to Dhanantari, and the so called demons of illness are driven out by the medicinemen with the help of mantras. In this respect the village *ojāhs* are more reliable, people think, than the physicians with Āyurvedic training. The fact is not that the mantras alone are all important, but that the mantras in the hands of the *ojāhs* using medicinal herbs are more effective, people think, than the herbs alone prescribed by the physicians. This superstition is popular even today, and it is more so with the tribes who believe that all diseases are caused by the demons of illness. Whatever the ground for this belief, along with the magical practices and mantras for which Kāmarūpa became a noted centre, evidently under the influence of the Tantrik system, the use of medicinal herbs became greatly popular among the people in general. It seems to us that a Kāmarūpī system of indigenous medicines was worked out with details, and it has not been difficult with a village *ojāh* to find out a herb from the neighbouring jungles. Our difficulty lies only in the identification of most of the medicinal herbs. The tradition has, however, been kept alive, and the Āyurvedic treatment of what is called the *Āsurī* type is very popular at least in the villages.

There was another side of the practice of Āyurvedic treatment in Assam. The Āhom and the contemporary rulers established separate departments for looking after and the treatment of animals. They maintained officers in charge of elephants and horses in particular. Ralph Fitch, who visited the Koch capital during the time of Naranārāyana in the 16th century A.D., observes thus : "They have hospitals for sheep, goats, dogs, cats, birds and for all living creatures. When they be old and lame they keep them until they die !'—(Gait, *History of Assam,* 61). It appears, therefore, that the Veterinary science was well developed, and it is admitted that this science is an important addition to the practice of indigenous medicines. A scientific treatise on elephant diseases, known as *Hastāyurveda* was compiled by one Pālakāpyamuni "in the region where the river Lauhitya flows from the Himalayas to the sea."—(*Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series, J.B.O.R.S.,* V, III, 311). The author was probably from Kāmarūpa. The treatise contains 160 chapters, divided into sections bearing on *mahāroga-kṣudraroga, śalya* (surgery), and *uttara* (therapy). A profusely illustrated work in Assamese, entitled *Hastividyārṇava* was compiled by Sukumār Barkāth in A.D. 1734 under the order of the Āhom ruler Śiva Sinha and his queen Ambikādevī. It is not based on the *Hastāyurveda,* but, as known from the text, the materials are taken from the work *Gajendra Cintāmaṇi* of Śambhūnātha. The manuscript is a voluminous work with 193 folios in original. It deals with different types of elephants up to folio 163 and then deals with their ailment and treatment with the help of medicinal herbs. Another valuable treatise on ailments of horses is the *Ghorānidāna* of Sāgarkhari in Assamese with 39 folios. The work describes the different kinds of horses, their symptoms of diseases and treatment. As many as 109 kinds of diseases and their treatment are described. It begins with what is given as *amūrtaka vyādhi,* and its treatment is as follows :—

General symptoms—the animal does not take food, and lies down and gets up frequently;

Medicines—give internally one seer of poppy seeds in three equal doses a day; give internally powdered long pepper and black pepper in equal proportions with milk; give also boiled rice, arum and long pepper in equal proportions in cow's ghee and apply the same in the urethra when cold. This will put an end to the disease.

There are a few other treatises like the *Aśvanidāna* and the *Ghorār vyādhir puthi,* preserved at the D.H.A.S., Gauhati, and on a careful and systematic study of these and many other works on Āyurvedic treatment, one will get a good idea about the use of medicinal herbs for the treatment of diseases of both the human beings and the animal life. It is to be admitted, therefore, that the Kāmarūpī system of indigenous medicines contributed a great deal towards the Āyurvedic science in general, and the people at large have had a great faith in it. This accounts for the general good health condition in the country. As Shihābuddīn, who came to Assam with the Moghul general Mir Jumlā, observes in 1662 : "The people of this country are free from certain fatal and loathsome diseases—which prevail in Bengal. They are also immune from many other lingering maladies."—(J. N. Sarkar, *J.B.O.R.S.*, I, 179).

Another important branch of human knowledge in which people from this part of India made significant progress is the allied subjects of Astrology, Astronomy and the preparation of the Almanac. The study of the sciences is indicated not only by the place names like Prāgjyotiṣa, Navagraha or Citraśaila but also by the voluminous manuscripts, lying scattered all over Assam. Inscriptions show that the rulers maintained *Daivajñas,*—(Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva of the 12th century A.D.), who are known today as *Gaṇakas*. They had State duties under the Āhom rulers, and it is given that no big undertaking could be possible unless they were consulted. Omens and divinations in fact had a special place in the private and public life of the inhabitants of this land, and equal importance was given to astrological calculations. Prāgjyotiṣa itself is associated with the solar cult, planetary worship and the calculation of the stars from very early times. An important reference in this connection is made in the *Śāṅkhyāyana Gṛhya Saṁgraha;* this Prāgjyotiṣa is the same as the land of sun rise, Udayācala of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (58) and the *Varāha Purāṇa*. The interpretation of Prāgjyotiṣa as a place of eastern astrology is perhaps justified by a number of references made to its association with the planetary worship and their calculations, as proved by the *Kālikā Purāṇa* of about the 10th-11th century A.D. (*Chap.* 79). Spooner rightly points to the astronomical significance of the name in explaining the influence of the Iranian-Magian culture in Kāmarūpa.—(*J.R.A.S.*, 1915, 11, 433-36).

A valuable Sanskrit work of an early period on the subject is the *Kāmarūpa Nibandhanīya Khaṇḍasādhya.* The date of composition of the treatise has been read as A.D. 665, and if this date is correct, this will be a good evidence to show that astrological and astronomical study had a great antiquity in Kāmarūpa.—(P. Bhattacharyya, *J.A.R.S.*, X, 73). We have a few other representative treatises bearing on the said subjects. An Assamese work is the *Bhāsvatī* with 32 folios. It is based on the *Sūryya Siddhānta* of Satānanda Bhattacharyya and *Mahājyotiṣa.* The name of the work and that of the writer are given in the opening lines as follows :—

Ravipada kamalaṁ praṇamya mūrddhā sumatikaraṁ khalu Bhāsvatī pravandhe/racayati Kavirāja Chakravartī nija suta mohabhide kathāṁ dvijāgreḥ.//

The work begins with the calculations of the different positions of the sun, the moon and the stars and ends with the descriptions of the solar and lunar eclipses. No date is given, but on palaeographic grounds, it may be ascribed to a fairly early period. Another voluminous astrological treatise in Sanskrit language is the *Jyotiṣa-tattva* with 90 folios by Raghunandana Bhattāchāryya whose name is given in the opening lines as follows :—

Oṁ namaḥ Śrī Sūryyāyaḥ/praṇamya saccidānanda bhāskaraṁ jagadīśvaraṁ jyotiḥ śāstreṣu tāni vaktri Śrī Raghunandanaḥ//.

Another work in Sanskrit is the *Adbhūtasāra* with 24 folios by Srī Mahādeva Śarmā, copied in Śaka 1760. It is a treatise on extraordinary events, supposed to be caused by the evil influence of the stars, dealing with their propitiatory rites. The author has quoted many authorities in support of his calculations. Another small manuscript with 5 folios in Sanskrit with occasional explanations in Assamese is the *Aṣṭavargīdaśā,* and the name occurs in the opening lines as follows :—

Yāvati yāvati rekhā grahānāmāṣṭavargake/
tāvatīm dviguṇī kṛtya cāṣṭābhiḥ pariśodhayet//

The treatise contains the astrological formulae by which the calculation of the stars at one's nativity is made by the *aṣṭavargī* method. It teaches how the space occupied by a particular planet in the Zodiac is to be divided by doubling these lines and substracting 8 from the result. Another voluminous Sanskrit manuscript with 57 folios is the *Ayanāṁśaṁ,* copy of which was made in Śaka 1756. It describes the influence of the stars according to their positions and also according to the time calculated on the basis of the precession of the Equinox. It discusses further how a life's chart is to be prepared on the position of the stars at one's nativity.

The *Jyotiṣadarpaṇa* of Bhūta Ratnākara is another astrological work. It describes how the *lagna* of a new born baby is to be determined and its accuracy tested by the *drekānas*. The *Jyotiṣamuktāvalī* with 23 folios in Sanskrit by Vaṅśīvādana Dvija is a valuable astrological primer. Another voluminous treatise with 66 folios is the *Jyotiṣa Ratnamālā*, dealing with calculations for preparation of horoscopes. The *Jātakacandrikā* of Jagadīśvara with 67 folios is another Sanskrit treatise with occasional explanations in Assamese. It contains detailed discussion of the *vāras, nakṣatras, tithis,* etc., and has laid down rules for the preparation of horoscopes. Towards the end there is a good collection of notes on various astrological topics. The *Yuddhajayārṇava daśā* with 19 folios, dealing with different kinds of *daśās* is another notable contribution to the science of astrology. At the end occur the following explanations in Assamese :—

tetriś diyā laivā śani/gurur teṣaṣṭi laivā gaṇi/
rāhur dvādaśa ketur kuri/bhṛgur tanoi gaṇi sattari//

The *Dvādaśarāśi nirṇaya* in Sanskrit with 11 folios is a treatise on astrological calculations of the 12 constellations, called signs of the Zodiac. It begins with an almanac showing important events of the year during different *tithis.* It describes then how certain astrological calculations are to be made, and concludes with the method of calculating the *Yoginī dasā.* The *Grahavija jñāna* in Sanskrit with 12 folios, copied in Śaka 1760 is another valuable contribution. It deals with the movements of the stars and their conjunction. The *Grahaṇa-āryyā* in Sanskrit with 18 folios by Garga Āchāryya, copied in Śaka 1772 is also an important addition. It deals with the method of finding out the solar and lunar eclipses and lays down rules for determining the exact time of the eclipses and their effect. The work is based on the *Bhāsvatī Khaṇḍa Sādhya.* The *Jyotiṣacakra* with 14 folios is a notable contribution to the science. The calculations are based on 64 *cakras* resembling the signs of the zodiac.

A valuable treatise on Hindu almanac is the *Jyotiṣa* with 30 folios, copied in Śaka 1754. It lays down rules for calculating the different positions of the sun, and the moon, and teaches also the calculations of an almanac. The *Samvatsara Gaṇanā* with 16 folios is another Sanskrit work on the Hindu almanac. It describes how calculation is to be made to find out the important events in each year. The yearly Hindu almanac contains an account of the coming events of the year to which the almanac relates, and this manuscript is found to have given a detailed account of such calculations. The tradition has come down to this day and the Kāmarūpi *paṇḍitas* are adept in the preparation of the annual almanac, based on the old and somewhat distinct system of astronomical and arithmetical calculations.

Besides the treatises mentioned above, there are a large number, preserved at the Department of Historical & Antiquarian Studies, and equally large number have been lying with the professional *Daivajñas* for their own use. From these and many other works when brought to light, and systematically studied, one is sure to get an idea about the extent of contribution made towards the development of the allied sciences of Astronomy, Astrology, Almanac and also arithmetic and palmistry. It may be admitted that the Kāmarūpī system of astrological calculations are found to have been based on the *Saṁhitās*, the *Sūryya Siddhānta* and other Indian texts, which the manuscripts have extensively quoted, and for corroboration, references have sometimes been made to Dāka Puruṣa and Khanā, as to Varāhamihira. But in this sphere also local characteristics hold the ground, which become marked in the consultation of omens or divinations.

The Vaiṣṇava Renaissance in Assam

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THE great neo-Vaiṣṇava movement of Assam of the sixteenth century brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life, a distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour with an all-pervasive organisational set-up, and accelerated the pace of literature and the fine arts like music and painting. The dignity of individual endeavour of man as a distinct religious being and not as 'the thrall of theological despotism' was declared. Assam discovered herself as an integral part of the holy land of Bhāratavarṣa, and gloried in that discovery. The holy books in Sanskrit, the *litterae humaniores* of India, could no longer be sealed to the view of the common man by a rigid oligarchy. The use of the local language in expositions of theology was in itself a challenge to the erstwhile guardians of secret doctrines; they understood the significance of the challenge and 'protested very much'. The new humanism also looked askance at the many blood sacrifices, including the immolation of men, and the nice sacerdotalism that was the order of the day.

The use of Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, which formed but an island in a Tibeto-Burman sea, as the medium for the propagation of the neo-Vaiṣṇava faith led to its emergence as the language of all the people. As one of the oldest biographers of the Vaiṣṇava saints points out, the inculcation of this religion upon Kāmarūpa, a mleccha-deśa, is of immense significance. The ancient kingdom of Kāmarūpa was now undergoing a huge change, and it was having a regeneration, which timed well with the cultural resurgence; and the first possibilities of a unified and modern Assam were now in evidence.

The neo-Vaiṣṇava faith and movement

The leader of the Vaiṣṇava Renaissance in Assam was Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568). The date traditionally ascribed to his birth is 1371 Śaka, so that his death in 1490 Śaka would roughly give us one hundred and twenty years, the full span attributed to the mahāpuruṣa, although in another opinion he was born in 1385 Śaka. Born to the family of the Śākta Kāyastha overlord of the Bāra-Bhūyās at Bardowā, Śaṅkara enjoyed a gay and wild childhood, his parents having died and left him in his infancy. At his twelfth year he was placed under the care of a local paṇḍit, Mahendra Kandali. After a thorough education in grammar and Sanskrit lore, he came back home a proud and finished scholar, when he was caught in the silken tie of matrimony and had to confine himself to the coarse duties of a Bhūyā chief in spite of all his inclination on the side of a studious career. There were constant skirmishes with the neighbouring Kachārī tribe to worry him, and at the head of it came soon the death of his young wife, who left a girl child behind her. This bereavement seems to have made a deep influence upon Śaṅkara's mind with its natural poetical proclivity, for he now determined to go on pilgrimage to Purī, Vṛndāvana and other holy places. This he did when he was thirty-two years old (1481 A.C.), and left the administration in the hands of his two old uncles. His stay at Purī seems to have been long, and it was possibly in this religious centre that he received his illumination, for no earthly guru of his is known, and he later said to one of his followers that after he had visited the temple at Purī and bowed his head to Jagannātha enshrined there, it was his resolve not to bow it down to any other god, meaning that Jagannātha alone could be his guru and worshipful. Śaṅkaradeva composed lyrics in the artificial Brajabuli idiom during his sojourn in northern India, although some of his works like the *Hariścandra-upākhyāna* are said to have been written as early as his school-days. After twelve years of travelling Śaṅkara returned home a saint, carrying an abiding impression of the renascent Vaiṣṇavism, which with its lyric grace was pulsating in the heart of India 'in the widest commonalty spread.' He had now discovered his mission of life, and was well intent on forsaking the world. But the affectionate anxiety of his grandmother and all others around him made him marry for a second time; and he had also to resume administration under their pressure.

In the meantime he received from Purī a copy of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* furnished with the 'Bhāgavata-bhāvārtha-dīpikā' commentary of Śrīdhara-svāmī, and set to rendering parts of this visnuite purāṇa into Assamese with the definite intention of propounding and propagating the cult of bhakti, of the exquisite beauty of which he was firmly convinced. After he had made some sections of his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* among other books, he received his first proselytes. He adopted the attractive method of holding kīrtana or mass prayer and dramatic performances, and this soon attracted many people to his religion. He made a temple (kīrtana-gṛha, nāmghar) near his official headquarters at Bardowā, and this institution became the nucleus of the Vaiṣṇava organisation, which later spread throughout the three Assamese States of Asama, Kāmarūpa and Koc Behār in the form of regional establishments, called sattra, and numerous village temples, known as nāmghar.

Śaṅkara soon renounced his bhūyāship, and with his following, both mundane and divine, retreated across the Brahmaputra to regions occupied so long by other lesser Bhūyās. But finding themselves too near the growing Koc power under Viśvasiṁha (c. 1496—c. 1533), they migrated further to the east, and stationed themselves at Dhūwāhāṭ or Belaguri in the Mājuli island on the Brahmaputra, now a part of the Āhom kingdom.

At Dhūwāhāṭ a Śākta youth, Mādhava (1489-1596), also a scion of Kāyastha Bhūyās, a busy tradesman too, came to have a religious disputation with Śaṅkara as he found that the Vaiṣṇava was interdicting people from the worship of, and blood sacrifices to, the Devī, and all that in Kāmarūpa, the spiritual domain of the Mother Goddess. The hot debate, which went on vigorously for quite a few hours, ended in the immediate conversion of Mādhava. And Mādhava very readily gave up his trade, and dissolved a maturing proposal for marriage to choose a life of celibacy and ardent devotion and service to the guru. He became Śaṅkaradeva's dearest and closest disciple, supporting the guru in his proselytising and literary activities, and the greatest apostle of the new found faith, giving poise and strengh to the organisation of the Vaiṣṇava order in Assam.

But soon followed a period of unrest for the Vaisṇavas due to the hostility of the brahman priesthood, which found, to much chagrin, that its authority was being challenged by the new-fangled creed, which placed the brahman and the pariah alike on the same religious footing and opened the portals of sacred knowledge to the common man by rendering religious texts into the local language, and minimised the importance of ritualism by extolling the kīrtana form of worship and discarding the worship of many gods in favour of a rigid monotheism. Śaṅkara's followers were openly molested. He, therefore, arranged to meet the scholarly section of the hostile camp, and in the discussions that ensued the latter was completely routed. The opposition then vilely abused the ears of the Āhom monarch, Suhummung (1497-1539), against the religious rebel, who was immediately hauled up for trial ; but the saint acquitted himself well in the presence of the king, and was let off with honour. All the same, there was no cessation of hostility ; and although Śaṅkara's cousin, Rāmarāya, seems to have some administrative responsibility under the Āhoms, the Bhūyās, always suspects as a possible source of mischief, soon earned royal disfavour, and there was an order for the arrest of some of them including Śaṅkaradeva. Mādhava persuaded the Master to go underground for a time ; and he himself and Śaṅkara's son-in-law, Hari Bhūyā, were apprehended, and taken to the capital at Gaḍgāo for trial. Hari was beheaded ; and Mādhava, but an ascetic, was kept under detention for about nine months and then released.

This incident filled Śaṅkara's mind with disgust, but also provided the determination to leave the Āhom kingdom. The king of the western state of Koc Behār, Naranārāyaṇa (c. 1533-1587), and his brother and commander-in-chief of the Koc army, Śukladhvaja (the author of the 'Sāravatī' commentary on the *Gītagovinda*), already well-known for their learning and wisdom, were now leading an attack on northern parts of the Āhom kingdom. Some of the Bhūyās, related to Śaṅkaradeva and his group, had already joined the Koc camp. Śaṅkara and his following seized this opportunity, and rowed down the Brahmaputra for safety within the Koc state. They made their settlement at Barpeṭā, where the creed began to thrive and the order began to swell. The rich merchant, Bhavānanda (later, Nārāyaṇa Ṭhākura), a Musalmān tailor, Cāndsāi (Cānd-khān), some brahmans like Dāmodaradeva, and some officers of state were among those who joined him. The Vaiṣṇava could also count upon the help of Śukladhvaja, who married the daughter of Rāmarāya and also accepted the saint's faith. For the last eighteen or twenty years of his life now remaining, his sattra at Pāṭbāusī (Barpeṭā) became the centre of dissemination of the new light that bhakti brought. He, now a centenarian, made a second pilgrimage, covering only six months, to Purī. All the time he was also busy in writing books, which were to be the gospel of the new faith. The prestige and influence that he now commanded in the Koc kingdom made others jealous of him ; and insistent complaints against him and his religious activities were lodged with the king. After some persecution of the Vaiṣṇavas, Śaṅkaradeva presented himself at Naranārāyaṇa's court, and soon found himself pitted in a battle of arguments with brahman controversalists of the capital. At the end he rose triumphant ; and the saint and the monarch, so much struck by the profundity of his scholarship and the sublimity of his faith, became friends, and remained friends for the rest of their life. The Vaiṣṇavas now felt completely secure, and filled the land with their holy music. Śaṅkaradeva visited the Koc capital several times after this ; and it was here that he passed away in 1568 A.C. His soul and his message of Love have permeated into the national consciousness and the very being of the people. His name is ever on his nation's lips, and his music in the country's heart.

Śaṅkaradeva nominated Mādhavadeva as his successor to hold charge of the order. The latter set up his sattra at Sundarīdiyā (Barpeṭā), where he made his chief work, *Nāmaghoṣā,* among other compositions. From time to time he visited different places round about his sattra, and erected a temple primarily for the purpose of dramatic performances, but this soon grew into a sattra, the Barpeṭā-sattra. The hostile people were busy all the time, bringing allegations of broadcasting a corrupt religion against Mādhavadeva in the court of Raghudevanārāyaṇa (1581-1603), the son of Śukladhvaja, who quarrelled with his uncle Naranārāyaṇa after his father's death, and declared himself independent as the king of Kāmarūpa (the eastern half of the Koc state built by Viśvasiṁha, Naranārāyaṇa and Śukladhvaja). A contingent of sepoys raided the Barpeṭā-sattra, seized the petty belongings of the cloistered Vaiṣṅavas, and carried Mādhava and some of the monks there in boats to the capital at Vijaypur. But before the saint could be summoned for trial in the open court, the hostile paṇḍits withdrew their charges ; Mādhava was honourably acquitted, and the effects of the monks were returned to them. Soon after, however, the whimsical king sent Mādhavadeva a writ, asking him to leave Barpeṭā as early as possible and settle at Hājo with its Hayagrīva-Mādhava temple. But here the saint Mādhava attracted more people than the god Mādhava ; and seeing herein the possibility of fresh troubles, he hastily decided to leave Raghudeva's kingdom, and accordingly crossed the border over to Koc Behār, where Naranārāyaṇa's son, Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa (1587-1627) was now ruling.

There too he did not find a quiet life as many people found it difficult to accept Śaṅkaradeva's creed, and particularly because an officer, a qāji, could not take kindly to him on account of the Vaiṣṇavas' refusal to interdine with people outside of their fraternity. Mādhava was confronted with harsh controversies at the royal court; but the profundity of his learning came to good account in this impasse, and Lakṣminārāyaṇa declared the new faith, with two sattras in the capital, the state religion. The saint like the Master died in Koc Behār in 1596 A.C.

Śaṅkaradeva delegated to his brahman follower, Dāmodaradeva, the power of administering ordination, as this was considered expedient particularly in the case of brahman neophytes. Immediately after the death of the guru, however, there was a 'rift in the lute', and Dāmodara seceded from the main order, and formed a schism. It was represented to Parīkṣitanārāyaṇa of Kāmarūpa (1603-1616) that this brahman was bringing pollution on the country by accepting a śūdra's faith and by crying against the worship of all gods and goddesses. The king ordered externment of the saint, who made his way to the Koc Behār capital and built himself the Vaikuṇṭhapur-sattra there. It is remarkable that the three first great Vaiṣṇava ācāryas of Assam died in Koc Behār, which, by the logic of political history, is to-day not with this State.

Another brahman dissenter like Dāmodaradeva was Harideva, who claims only a few sattras of his following, confined to the present district of Kāmrūp. Śaṅkaradeva's family priest and friend, Rāmarāma, remained by his side all through his life, and the family springing from Rāmarāma remained loyal to the order, and supplied Pāṭbāusī and Barpeṭā-sattras with Superiors.

Mādhavadeva sent out holy men as apostles of the bhakti faith, the chief among them being Gopāladeva of Bhavānīpur, Padma Āṭā, and Gopāladeva better known as Vaṁśīgopāla. The nomination of Vaṁśīgopāla, a brahman, was approved by Dāmodaradeva also. These three apostles and their deputies established sattras mostly in Asama, that is, the Āhom kingdom; and some of their sattras are very rich, and claim each a large and widespread laity. Mādhava's sister's son, Rāmacaraṇa, and Mathurādāsa were left in charge of the temples built by the saint at Sundarīdiyā and Barpeṭā. The three sons of Śaṅkaradeva died prematurely, and his grandsons, Puruṣottama and Caturbhuja, and the latter's wife, Kanakalatā, appointed their deputies, who organised sattras in various places; and these sattras, almost a church by themselves, look up for inspiration to Bardowā, the birth-place of the saint. Dāmodaradeva appointed three nominees, who stayed in sattras in Kāmarūpa, while Vanamālīdeva, a brahman monk staying at his Vaikuṇṭhapur-sattra, migrated to the east, and established a powerful sattra (Dakhiṇpāṭ) under the patronage of the ruling Āhom king. Some sattras were brought into being by persons connected with Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva; and some of those set up by the divines mentioned above branched off each into several petty establishments.

Thus the three Assamese States of eastern India, namely, Asama, Kāmarūpa and Koc Behār, were covered by the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth with a network of these Vaiṣṇava establishments, and almost the whole Hindu population was now divided among them. Some of the adherents of the Vaiṣṇava order have made serious departures from the original tenets of the faith, or have relapsed into heterogenous doctrines discarded by the gurus. Others again have carried the puritanic zeal of the new faith very far indeed. The followers of Gopāladeva formed into a school, characterised by catholicity and a democratic outlook and freedom from the tyranny of creeds. It particularly thrived and acquired large followings in the north-eastern parts of Assam with their predominatingly Tibeto-Burman population, and reclaimed large numbers of people from animistic practices. The followers of the Mowāmarā or Māyāmarā mahanta within Gopāladeva's order rose in revolt as one man against royal oppression (1769), and succeeded in subverting Āhom power for a time. The history of Assam Vaiṣṇavism is one of many conflicts and persecutions. The course of political history of this eastern part of India also has been changing considerably from time to time. But the Renaissance, which had its beginnings in the activities of Śaṅkaradeva, has wrought itself into fulfilment in many ways, and marked out a definite place for Assam in the cultural map of India.

Tenets and practices of the faith

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the 'Sahasra-nāma' section of the *Padma-purāṇa* are popularly considered to be the authorities from which Śaṅkaradeva accepted the main articles of his faith, namely, satsaṁga (the assembly of bhaktas as a means of bhakti), ekaśaraṇa (shelter in one god, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, alone), and nāma (kīrtana, or prayer, as the main form of devotion). While the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Bhagavadgītā,* and other visnuite purāṇas and texts also have been adapted into Assamese or cited as authorities by the Vaiṣṇava writers, the writings of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva and a few other works approved by them or the order provide the gospel and have a canonical authority. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Bhagavadgītā* alone among Sanskrit works are used in the ceremonial readings. In the explanation of these two books, the 'Bhāgavata-bhāvārtha-dīpikā' and the 'Subodhinī' commentaries of Śrīdhara-svāmī have been used from the beginning with such slight moderations as may be found necessary to suit the peculiar tenets of the faith.

Śaṅkaradeva's creed is popularly known as mahāprurṣīyā dharma, the word 'mahapuruṣīya, being an imitation of Skt. 'mahāpauruṣika' (*Bhap.-p.,* 1.14.37, explained as mahāpuruṣo viṣṇus tadīyā mahāpauruṣikā vaikuṇṭhanāthānucarāḥ by Sridhara ; *Bhag.*-p.,2.1.10, explained as mahāpuruṣo viṣṇus tadīyaḥ by Śrīdhara, and rendered as mahāpuruṣar sevaka by Mādhavadeva, *Nāmaghoṣā,* 650), meaning that the worshipful is the transcendant Viṣṇu, the controller of prakṛti and puruṣa (prakṛti puruṣa duiro niyantā mādhava, *Nāmaghoṣā,* 405), and known as Brahman, paramātman and bhagavat (Nāmaghoṣā, 176 ; *Bhag.-p.,* 1.2.11).

The official name of the bhakti creed of Śaṅkaradeva is ekaśaraṇa nāmadharma, and this explains its cardinal principles, which enjoin the worship of one god, that is, Viṣṇu, especially in the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, and interdicts the votaries from the worship of any other deity, and indicates its main form, which consists of the utterance of the holy names of the god in the singing of songs in his glorification. The words of the Lord in what is called the carama śloka by the school of Rāmānuja in the *Bhagavadgītā,* demanding unswerving devotion to him (sarvadharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja, 18.66), are to be remembered. Bhaṭṭadeva, a brahman author, cites relevant authorites to say that a votary should not make offerings to the five gods in pañcayajña, for that would vitiate his ekaśaraṇa, but make offerings to Viṣṇu alone, and that would bring satisfaction to all the gods (*Bhag.-p.,* 4.31.14). The bhakta is not to cast either adoring or hateful glances on the idols of other gods ; nor should he visit places of their worship (Śaṅkaradeva, *Bhag.-p.,* 2). No hostility, however, is to be exhibited by him towards the adherents of other creeds while engaging himself in the worship of Viṣṇu, who alone is considered as being śuddha-sattva, of pure existence (nārāyaṇakalāḥ śāntā bhajanti hy anasūyavaḥ, *Bhag.-p.,* 1.2.26). It is, moreover, a religion of implicit love and faith, bhakti ; and love in order to be true to itself and its object must be avyabhacāriṇī, chaste even as a chaste wife ; it must not have behind it the idea of securing a return, not even the highest beatitude (ahaituky avyavahitā yā bhaktiḥ puruṣottame, *Bhag.-p.,* 3.29.12). The ideal bhakta is, therefore, no aspirant to the release of his soul (muktito nispṛha).

There are eight modes of bhakti (śravaṇa, kīrtana, smaraṇa, pādasevana, arcana, vandana, dāsya, sakhya, ātmanivedana). Of these the Assam Vaiṣṇavas considered śravaṇa and kīrtana to be sufficient as the religious endeavour of man towards the highest consummation possible. They are accessible to the highest and the lowest alike, and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary ; and much of the vagaries of form and formality is also reduced to the minimum. A novice (prākṛta bhakta) may, if he likes, worship Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa in an image, for arcana is admitted as one of the nine modes of bhakti ; but the most palpable image of the Lord is no stone or clay, but his ardent bhakta, whose company is to be sought by all means. One who spurns the bhakta and goes to seek salvation from an idol is 'worse than a bull' (garuto adhama, Śaṅkaradeva, *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* 3.61 ; sa eva gokharaḥ, *Bhag.-p.,* 10.84.13). The Lord, moreover, has no other image than the Word (mantramūrtim amūrtikam, *Bhag.-p.,* 1.5.38). The ideal bhakta, therefore, worships the Lord within with but what his heart can offer (Śaṅkaradeva, *Bhakti-ratnākara,* 9, citing *Bhag.-p.* 11.27.15). Like a mystic, Śaṅkaradeva realised that God lived broadcast in the general hearts of all creatures, and it is only when we miss this truth that we go to seek him outside (*Kīrtana-ghoṣā,* 8.11). Idol-worship does not play any important part in Śaṅkaradeva's system ; and this small bit of ritualism can also be done away with if the devotee wishes. The activities in the sattras consist of prayer services, divided into a day-long programme of three to fourteen parts, each called a prasaṅga or nāma-prasaṅga. These are held in the congregation hall (kīrtana-gṛha, nāmghar), where the object of veneration is the guru-āsana, with some works of the Masters in ancient folios. And this is how nāmadharma is performed. The secret formula confided by the Superior to the novice at the time of initiation into bhakti consists of four names of the Lord : rāma-kṛṣṇa-hari-nārāyaṇa. The initiate must cultivate intimate faith in, and resign himself to the power of, four vastus, or reals, which are nāma, the sacred name of Lord God ; deva, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, the sole refuge of the jīvas ; guru, the religious preceptor, who directs the initiate's faltering steps to the Way unto the Lord ; and bhakta, the intimate fraternity in whose company to seek out the Lord of Love. Of the different attitudes of bhakti Śaṅkaradeva advocated dāsya, or servitude, and not madhura, sakhya, or vātsalya. The votary is to consider himself as the servant and God as the master ; and the servant is to know none other than God as claiming his all-out devotion. The Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult is not acknowledged in this system of Vaiṣṇavism, nor is any śakti of Viṣṇu to be recognised in his worship.

Śaṅkaradeva was a śūdra, but accepted brahmans as his disciples, who made such obeisance to him as a spiritual guru was due to receive. This was one of his actions that could not be approved by the orthodox supporters of casteism, and Śaṅkaradeva had to render an explanation in the Koc court. Dāmodaradeva also was taken to book for accepting a śūdra's religion. The explanation offered was that a śūdra might be debarred from rendering vedic mantras to other people, but is free to give nāma-mantra to any person. In Śaṅkaradeva's system, therefore, we find brahman disciples of śūdra teachers, and even people who are untouchables in other parts of India in the following of brahman mahantas. We also find a brahman occupying Superiorship of a sattra in succession to a śūdra. No body, on the other hand, is to be considered as unfit for securing initiation into the cult on caste considerations. Among the disciples of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were Cāndsāi and Jayahari, both Musalmāns ; Govinda, a Gāro ; Jayānanda, a Bhuṭīya ; Mādhava of Jayanti of the Hīrā or potters' profession ; Śrīrāma, believed to have been a Kaivarta ; and Dāmodara, a Baṇiyā. A later Superior, Śrīrāmadeva, administered ordination to some Nagas. Āhoms, Koces, Miris, Kachārīs, Marāṇs and people of many other tribes were also freely converted to the Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva's order. It is the catholic outlook of this religion that could thus unify different peoples into one spiritual fraternity, and also achieve a cultural synthesis.

Śaṅkaradeva was a house-holder, and Mādhavadeva lived a life of celibacy. One need not forsake the world, they taught, to find God. It was probably the ideal of Mādhavadeva's individual life that brought into being an order of ascetics (kevalīyā), who formed the innermost circle within the sattras. But there could be married persons as well as monks in these establishments as divines or ordinary residents. There is no order of nuns, and women in general are not allowed to mix with the men in congregations. There are, of course, instances of women holding the position of Superiors.

Śaṅkaradeva's grand-daughter-in-law, Kanakalatā, made a definite contribution to the growth of the sattra system when she organised the Bardowā group therein and on her own appointed twelve deputies, all men of course, as heads of sattras.

Social reorganisation

Śaṅkaradeva did not, or could not, do away with the caste divisions; but the bhakti movement did tone down much of the stigma attached to such discriminations. In the Vaiṣṇava congregation all members of the fraternity were equal. The prayer services and the reading of sacred texts could be conducted by persons able to do it, irrespective of his social standing in the old scale. The offerings to the deity could be distributed in the assembly by men of any caste within the circle of bhaktas. Notwithstanding persecution from the old orthodoxy, people flocked to Śaṅkaradeva's side to listen to the message of Love, and met there as equal sons of God.

Śaṅkaradeva thus effected a great change and cleansing of hearts. He also taught people personal cleanliness and correct social behaviour. Ever since the day of receiving ordination, the life of a bhakta becomes a life of dedication. Along with the initiation he is taught the ways of a clean life, inward and outward, in minute details, to which he has to adhere with the greatest possible care. General sadācāra or good conduct was for the most part outward śauca-śuddhi, maintained by an ample use of water; and an initiate was always to be distinguished by his behaviour in this regard. Thorough cleansing of the body before the meals was an indispensable part of the bhakta's daily routine. When a person was received into the faith, he had to give up old unclean ways,—the taking of intoxicants, the keeping of unclean animals and birds, the cultivation of poppy for opium. Although the killing of animals was deprecated as a mark of general kindness to all living beings, the monks as well as lay disciples could take fish and venison. The great teacher that Śaṅkaradeva was thus held up an ideal of balanced life, not of indulgence and license, but, at the same time, not of renunciation and self-mortification. By not admitting Rādhā or any other female complement of the worshipful in course of the worship, and by excluding women from the quiet life in the sattras and the general congregations, Śaṅkaradeva saved his own order from the possibilities of degradation.

The sattras played a great role in the social life of the people, and as a social force this institution was greatly strengthened by the acceptance of the Vaiṣṇava faith by the Āhom kings and nobles. The Hindu Assamese had now two unavoidable affiliations, that of temporal allegiance to the State and the king, and that of spiritual submission to this religion and a guru, who is the Superior of a sattra. The popular saying, rajār khājanā gurur kar, 'rent for the lands to the king, and holy tax to the guru' (in a sattra), indicates how conscious people were of this double allegiance binding people's life. The spiritual obligation gave people a dignity, a balanced view of life and an attention for details, and made them God-fearing and moral beings. The acceptance of the faith indicated to them that others of it were to be treated as equals rather than as victims of social stratification. In Assam toleration became the rule rather than the exception. There were, of course, hot and bitter moments of history when interference in matters religious was met even with the clash of arms ; but this heat and bitterness came as the ultimate result of the admission of certain exotic elements into the religious life of Assam at a moment when this indigenous Vaiṣṇavism with its ramifications became a vital and all-pervading force. It was seen during the insurrection of the Mowāmarīyā Vaiṣṇavas in the latter part of the eighteenth century that while the royal camp constantly suffered from land-slides, betrayals, treachery and such other lapses, the Vaiṣṇava rebels, mostly uneducated rustics, acted as one man and maintained a high moral tone, inspired by the sincerest adherence to the cause of the guru.

With the organisation of sattras came their decentralised replica, the institution of village nāmghar, something like the parish church. From the beginning the nāmghar formed the hub of all village activities. It was the village club and theatre. It exercised a close spiritual control over all members of the community, and held them back from many an evil act. In fact, this institution might be called the village parliament, and a parliament run too on broad democratic principles. It was the village court ; trials of disputes and crimes were held in it, and no one dared disregard the judgment pronounced by the elders of the village. An excommunication could be decreed by this village panchayat, and is the worst thing that a man in society could dread in those days. Only difficult cases were referred to the Superior of the sattra to which the delinquent belonged, or to the government judiciary. Thus through the twin institutions of sattra and nāmghar Assamese society was neatly organised ; and the moral tone of the people with such vigilance all around was bound to be very fine indeed.

Vedantic thought

For an account of the theology and philosophy, ethics and religious doctrines of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, we have to turn mainly to Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti-ratnākara*, a work in Sanskrit, beside his other works in Assamese and the writings of other Assamese Vaiṣṇavas. But it is not a work on theology and, much less, of philosophy, properly so called. This doctrinal treatise, however, exhibits a wide learning, limited only by a sectarian view, and a fine analytic scholarship at work. It is also interesting to note how Śaṅkara caught hold of works of such a variety of forms. And the materials collected are always set forth in a finely systematic manner. Śaṅkaradeva and others of his school interpreted the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in the local language, and let it out as the secret of the Vedānta (vedāntaro guhya). Several early schools of Vaiṣṇavism had prepared each a commentary on the *Brahma-sūtras*. Śaṅkaradeva of Assam and Caitanya of Bengal did not, however, deem it necessary to follow the example of these sects. Śaṅkaradeva in his *Bhakti-ratnākara*, Mādhavadeva in his *Nāmaghoṣā*, and Bhaṭṭadeva in his *Bhakti-viveka* cite the authority of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* itself (12.13.15) to say that this purāṇa is the essence of all Vedānta (sarvavedānta-sāram). Jīva Gosvāmī, the philosophical apologist of Caitanyaism, declares that the puraṇa is Vyasa's own commentary of the aphorisms of Vedānta. The verse cited by Śaṅkaradeva and others need not, however, be taken as a reference to the systematized philosophy of the *Brahma-sūtras,* as much as to the Vedantic thought in its process of growth as in the Upaniṣads. In *Bhakti-ratnākara,* as elsewhere, Śaṅkaradeva relies absolutely upon the authority of the *Bhāgāvata-purāṇa,* the *Bhagavadgītā,* other visnuite purāṇas and sectarian texts.

Śaṅkaradeva nowhere tries to work out an independent system of thought ; and his philosophical views have, therefore, to be culled and put together before we can give it a name and a place in the history of Indian thought. The philosophic teaching of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* as Farquhar points out, "stands nearer to Śaṅkara's system than to the theistic Sāṅkhya which dominates earlier Puranic works." In the interpretation of the purāṇa, moreover, Śaṅkaradeva and other Assamese Vaiṣṇavas greatly leaned back upon the commentary of Śrīdhara-svāmī, the mahant of the Śaṇkarite (advaitin) Govardhanamaṭha at Purī (c. 1400), combining and tempering the severe monistic idealism of advaita with the emotionalism of bhakti. It is thus natural that Śaṅkaradeva and others of his school should tend to be monist.

Brahman is the origin, the support, and the end of the world. It is both the efficient as well as the material cause (nimitta, upādāna kāraṇa) of the world. Just as earthen pots are nothing different from clay, just as gold ornaments are nothing different from gold, the world is born out of, and end in, Brahman. The world is substantially Brahman, and depends on it. But the analogy of clay and pots and of gold and gold ornaments, which is brought in to uphold that kārya (effect) is no different from kāraṇa (cause), and the presenting of the jīvas as parts of brahman (brahma-aṁśa jīva) as Śaṅkaradeva does in places may tend to *pariṇāmavāda* (evolution of a like object from a like object), which is ultimately not to be admitted. The persisting analogy put forth is that of a rope appearing as a serpent to the casual view (jarīta upaji yena āche sarpajñāna), which signifies vivarta (phenomenal appearance). Thus in Śaṅkaradeva's system of thought māyāvāda or idealism, which was discarded by the main schools of Vaiṣṇavism, persists, and goes along with bhakti.

Underlying the false world of appearances, Brahman lends a semblance of reality (sadābhāsa). The world that is unreal (asat), being connected with nescience (avidyā-yukta), only appears as real, being born out of the real Brahman (asanta jagatakhāna tomāta udbhava bhaila, santa hena prakāśe sadāya). This is adhyāsa, the appearance of a thing where it is not. The false appearances are made possible through māyā, which is explained as a power of God, that conceals vastu (object) and projects avastu (non-object) to view (avastuka dekhāwaya vastuka āvari). Practically no distinction is made among māyā, avidyā and prakṛti, although Śrīdhara says that the same prakṛti is called avidyā with āvaraṇa-śakti (concealment) and as the upādhi of jīvas, and again called māyā with vikṣepa-śakti (projection) and as the upādhi of Īśvara. When avidyā, which conceals ātman to view, dissolves, the jīva realises the self even as one's ornaments on the neck would come to one's view (avidyā naśile lāga kṛṣṇnaka pāwaya yena kaṇṭhalagna vastuka sākṣāta). Māyā and prakṛti are often represented as the śakti and consort of the Lord. God pervades the world, but is not touched by its merits and demerits (Śaṅkara, *Bhag.-p.*, 2), nor is he exhausted in the world, but creates, maintains and destroys it through māyā residing in him.

In the 22nd chapter of *Bhakti-ratnākara,* the difference between Īśvara and jīva is brought out. Īśvara is the controller of māyā through his power of consciousness (vidyāśaktyā māyāniyantā), and jīva is ever mortified under the pressure of māyā. Jīva can be released only when it attains knowledge through the love of God. He cites from an unidentified work, *Yogasāra,* to say that jīva is unchangeable, all-pervasive and full of calm (avikārī vibhuḥ śāntaḥ), and nothing apart from paramātman. Being enveloped in misapprehension and ignorance (bhrāntyajñānāvṛta), jīva does not know itself as such.

It should, therefore, be the endeavour of jīva to free itself from the fetters of māyā. Śaṅkaradeva held bhakti to be the means by which to attain release. Īśvara-bhakti leads to jñāna, perfect knowledge, and jñāna leads to release. Jñāna is considered here as a bye-product or a natural result of bhakti, and mokṣa comes as a corollary. But the ideal bhakta would never seek or accept nirvāṇa or any other form of mokṣa as much as he would beseech the Lord to bestow on him the unending privilege of bhakti ; only let there be no vagaries of māyā, manas (the mind) and ahaṅkārā (the ego).

Śaṅkaradeva also accepted the emotionalised Sāṅkhya as well as Yoga physiology and psychology as set forth in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* and both these systems are explained in relation and as helps to bhakti.

Hitherto no system of Indian thought seems to have made a deep impression upon the people of Assam. With the inculcation of Vaiṣṇavism upon them, the Vedānta was imbued into the general consciousness of the people and became a common property. Although generally in their poetry, Śaṅkara, Mādhava and others kept the dry dicta of philosophy at a distance inasmuch as that poetry was for the ordinary and unlettered also, they have in many places wrought Vedantic thought into simple and lucid lines, so that even the general run of monks in the sattras could render a verbal digest of it for the enlightenment and solace of the world-worn laity.

A great age in literature

There was the efflorescence of a great literature in the wake of the Śaṅkaradeva movement of Assam. Śaṅkara and Mādhava themselves composed a good number of songs, dramas, verse narratives and other types of literature, wherein they expounded and elaborated the teachings of the faith they sought to propagate. A host of poets, writers and scholars like Ananta Kandali, Rāma Sarasvatī, Vaikuṇṭhanātha Kaviratna, Śrīdhara Kandali, Gopāladeva of Bhavānīpur, Rāmacaraṇa Ṭhākura, Daityāri Ṭhākura, Gopālacaraṇa Dvija, flocked under the banner of bhakti, and formed into a vigorous literary movement. It was the age of one ideal, that of bhakti ; of one god, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa ; of one leadership, that of Śaṅkaradeva ; of one book, the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa.* All other types of matter, almost invariably taken from some visnuite text, were brought under the dictates of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa.* The Vaiṣṇava writers's adherence to the sanction of scriptural authority amounted to a limitation upon their creative ability and a curb upon their poetic genius. Non-the-less, the literary output of Śaṅkara and Mādhava alone is considerable, and is characterised by a rare power of rendering the spirit of the original in unimpaired beauty and by occasional flights of creative imagination. Their literary works acted as the chief machinery of propaganda of the faith, and afforded both enlightenment and pleasure to the people. Śaṅkaradeva is said to have rendered eight out of the twelve books of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* and this was done at the teeth of much opposition. It was Rāmānanda of northern India, we might remember, who mooted the idea of preaching in a modern Indian language. As a legacy from the Assamese poets preceding him, he received a literary form of language with much poise and beauty, as also a few verse-forms. The immediately preceding period of Assamese literature exhibited a zeal for story-telling, and the two Indian epics and some tracts from the purāṇas were done into the language. But this period hardly represents a literary movement, a movement with a definite ideal. The age of Śaṅkaradeva marks a literary and cultural resurgence.

In his early works, *Hariścandra-upākhyāna* and *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa,* Śaṅkaradeva exhibits the same narrative zeal as was evident in the preceding period of Assamese poetry. In his renderings from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and other purāṇas no particular attention is paid to literary form, and in places remain 'formless fermenting verbiage', but the teaching of bhakti therein is not to be missed. The *Bhakti-pradīpa* denounces the worship of other deities in preference to Kṛṣṇa bhakti. Each of the 25 sections of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā,* the most popular and important of Śaṅkaradeva's works, contains several kīrtana songs with refrains, goes to relate a story or expound a subject. The *Anādi-pātana* is an account of cosmology and cosmogony, philosophy and theology. *Guṇamālā,* a tiny work of six kīrtanas of jingling verses, is a remarkable feat of mental speed and brevity of expression.

Some of the writings of Śaṅkara and Mādhava are complementary in character. Mādhava rendered the Bālakāṇḍa, while Śaṅkara makes an adaptation of the final kāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa, divesting it of all intervening episodes, and added them to the central four books translated by the predecessor, Mādhava Kandali. Śaṅkara composed 34 songs, later known as bargīta, Mādhava complementing them with 157 of his composition. Śaṅkara's songs sing of the futility of human efforts, and urges upon listeners the need for bhakti ; some of them are prayer songs, pure and simple, and didactic verses. Mādhava's songs breathe an open-air atmosphere, and excel in the description of Kṛṣṇa's child life and the bringing out of the eternal mother in Yaśodā. Both these saints wrote a number of songs called bhaṭimā (panegyrics) in praise of the worshipful Lord, Śaṅkara making two in praise of King Naranārāyaṇa and Mādhava one to his guru. The dramas (aṅka, nāṭa or nāṭaka, popularly ankīyā nāṭa) of both are a type by themselves, and do not follow any model, Sanskrit, Prākrit or otherwise. There are no Act or scene-divisions in them. The sūtradhārā, taken from the classical drama, is the central character, conducting the whole action with songs, dances and explanatory commentary. The plays are in an artificial literary dialect, used in the bargīta and bhaṭimā songs also, later known as Brajāwalībhāṣa or Brajabuli with a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili and Hindī and a tincture of other elements. A like idiom was used by the Vaiṣṇava lyricists of Bengal and Orissa perhaps a little later. Śaṅkara has left us six aṅkas : *Patnīprasāda, Kālidamana, Keligopāla, Rukmiṇīharaṇa, Pārijātaharaṇa* and *Rāmavijaya.* The younger poet differs from his Master in his dramatic technique just a little, his playets (jhumurā) being more operatic in pattern. As in his lyrics so in his plays he is preoccupied with the Kṛṣṅa of Vṛndāvana more than anything else. He wrote *Arjunabhañjana, Cordharā, Pimparāguchuwā, Bhūmiluṭiwā* and *Bhojanavyavahāra,* four others, *Brahmāmohana, Bhūṣaṇaharaṇa, Rāsajhumurā* and *Koṭorakhelowā,* being also ascribed to him. He rendered only a small part of the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* describing Yudhiṣṭhira's rājasūya. But the greatest contribution of this saint poet to Assamese poetry and thought is the *Nāmaghoṣā,* which excels in giving lucid and musical expression to his inner experience as well.

The literature that was now born in the wake of the Vaiṣṇava movement included many translations and adaptations from the two epics, the *Bhagavad-gītā,* the *Bhāgavata* and other purāṇas, and the *Gīta-govinda.* A rich biographical literature, giving detailed accounts of the movement centering round the activities of the Masters, soon had its growth. In the Assamese versions of the Mahābhārata, particularly by Rāma Sarasvatī, a large mass of new matter has been thrust upon the original. Sarasvatī's *Bhīmacarita* and Śrīdhara Kandali's *Kāṇkhowā* have an independent story construction, perhaps inspired by folk form and content.

After the Assamese Brajabuli prose of Śaṅkara and Mādhava came the rhythmic prose of Vaikuṇṭhanātha Kaviratna in his *Bhāgavata-kathā* (c. 1594-96) and *Gītākathā* (c. 1597-98) and of Gopālacaraṇa Dvija in his *Bhaktiratnākara-kathā* (c. 1600), in which the two writers adopted the literary language of the poets. A more real prose with a dignified tone is that of the anonymous vaiṣṇava-caritas, the vogue of which started about the same time as the chronicles of the Āhoms in a realistic prose of everyday use. In point of date this growth of a prose literature in the easternmost member of modern Indo-Aryan languages is very remarkable indeed.

In Assam in certain Vaiṣṇava circles no sattra abbot could justify his appointment without writing a drama in the style of the Masters. This gave rise to a strong theatre movement, although the performance of a drama of the Masters was prized everywhere the most. Numerous songs in the style of bargīta and nāmaghoṣā also came to be composed sometimes merely as a work of routine by the divines. For the most part, of course, the dramas and songs of the late Śaṅkaradeva period do not have any outstanding merit to commend themselves. The ideals of Vaiṣṇava poetry were so universally acknowledged that the Śākta literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, and even the political annals of the Āhoms and the Koces came to be modelled on that poetry.

The tradition of classical music

The emotionalism of bhakti inspired poets all over India to lyricism, and the emphasis on prayer as the chief mode of worship patronised popular music. It has been marked that the bhakti movement promoted the culture of the dhrūpad style of singing in particular in many parts of the country. In Assam too neo-Vaisnavism brought in its train a wide culture of music. The Vaiṣṇava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety.

Among the different forms of this music the two tuned to classical Indian rāgas are bargīta, and aṅkīyā gīta or songs of the aṅkas. The name of the rāga in these two types is indicated at the top of the text. In all the aṅkīyā gītas and only three bargītas (these three being known as ṣaḍchandar gīta) tālas (time) are also named. A bargīta does not always have to keep time in its singing. When an individual bhakta pours forth his devotion in public or in the domestic temple in the measures of a bargīta, his singing is not generally controlled by the time beats. At other times, especially in congregations, tāla is maintained in the performance of bargītas. Like the tevaram of South India (7th-9th cent.), there are generally some particular tālas attached to particular rāgas so much so that people would refer to the belowāra melody-mode as rūpaka belowāra, because it is commonly timed to the rūpaka tāla. On the other hand, we get instances of the application of quite a few tālas in the course of the singing of one song in one rāga. At the end of the second line of each of the songs, the syllable dhruṁ is placed, which indicates that the first two lines constitute the dhurva or refrain, to be repeated in the singing of the succeeding verses, called pada. In the last couplet of the pada the name of the writer occurs.

Some people have, almost aimlessly, attempted to categorise this rāga music of Assam, some trying to identify it with prabandha-saṅgīta, others with dhrupad, while still others would like to reserve it as a category by itself. As in saṅgīta-śāstras, the prabandha-gītas, of which we scarcely get a specimen to-day, consist of several parts like udgrāha, dhruva, melapaka, antarā and ābhoga. In some sattras the ālāpa or anibaddha part of rāga songs is called ugār, which some seek to identify with udgrāha. The character dhruṁ attached to the burthen is, again, supposed to hark back to the dhruva part of prabandha. But all this leaves much ground for consideration. On the other hand, the early history of the dhrupad school refers to the reign of Mānsiṁha Tomar, a contemporary of Akbar. The technique of this type, moreover, does not apply to the rāga music of Assam. In what relation this music stands to the Hindustani or Karnataka styles is yet to be seen. Apparently, there are names of rāgas common to all these schools, or common to at least two of them. A bargīta in dhanaśrī may look like bhīmpalāsi of northern India and ābherī of the South. The Assamese kalyāṇa may correspond to suddh kalyāṇ of the North. But all these await the investigation of the expert for the final analysis.

In the full-scale execution of a bargīta or aṅkīyā gīta there are the usual two parts of rāga music, ālāpa or anibaddha part and the gīta or nibaddha part. In the ālāpa, popularly known as rāga diyā (the giving of the rāga, that is, its basic form) or rāga ṭanā (the extension of the rāga), words like Rāma, Hari, Govinda, and not the solfa syllables, are used. It is generally divided into four parts, which do not have any particular names except the third, known as tolani (the raising of the voice to a higher pitch). These four parts may perhaps be compared to the four parts of classical ālāpa, corresponding to asthāyī, antarā, sañcārī and ābhoga. The singing of the text then follows, and this is timed to a tāla. A tāla has two parts, mūl bājanā or gā-mān (the main part) and ghāt (sharp extensions of the main pattern of the tāla). The gā-mān is played on the khol or mṛdaṅga and cymbals as the text of the song is sung. When the singer is in rest at intervals, the drummers play the intricate patterns of ghāts.

From quite early times in the history of Indian music attempts were made to visualise the melody-modes in the form of persons. This tendency to deification of rāgas took definite shape in the 16th century, and were particularly popularised by the rāgāmālā paintings of northern India. In Assam we have such visualisation of rāgas in the form of rāga-mālitā (small poems giving a mythological origin of a rāga).

Indian musicians and theorists have ascribed different melodies severally to the eight watches (prahara) of the day. Opinion, however, is at variance in regard to the assignment of rāgas to the different praharas. The sattra ojās have also made such assignments in their own way. Pūrvī or pūravī, for example, which is very generally known as an evening melody, is placed by these ojās in the early dawn.

No scientific treatise on the music of Assam has so far been available. A fragmentary manuscript, *Vādya-pradīpa*, dealing with tālas, has been discovered, and is being edited by the present writer.

The tradition of classical dancing

Śaṅkaradeva, who refers to his father Kusumavara as a gandharva incarnate, has also left a rich legacy of a style of classical Indian dancing. This school has some features in common with the Manipuri style, recognised as one of the four all-India classical schools, and one could surmise the impact of the sattra school on the Manipuri rather than the reverse, as the former is the style to have evolved and established itself earlier, for the Manipuris had their Vaiṣṇavism, with which their classical dancing is associated, only in the 18th century. It is not known what elements contributed to the evolution of the sattra style. The dances, in spite of all the neglect with which it is received by the moderns, still possess a number of hastas, intricate and developed choreographic patterns, distinctive costumes and a variety of masks. The music mostly depends upon the khol or mṛdaṅga, various forms of cymbals, supporting rāga and other songs. No woman dancer or actress is allowed in this school, there being no order of nuns in the sattras. Even in the village performances the women rôles are played by boys.

The sattra dances mainly centre round the aṅka dramas of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. In their performances these as well as other Vaiṣṇava dramas are nothing if not dances and music. The master of the show, that is, the sūtradhāra or sūtradhārī, the hero, that is, Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, and the women rôles, that is, the Vṛndāvana gopīs, provide the class types of the dance performance, while other notable dance features are the war dances and the dances accompanying the preliminary music called dhemāli (perhaps a clever translation of the term pūrvaraṅga).

The Assam school of painting

One of the many forms in which the Vaiṣṇava Renaissance of India manifested itself is the art of painting. Painters were employed in the work of illuminating Vaiṣṇava and other texts like Tulsīdās's *Rāma-carita-mānasa,* Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda,* the Old Gujarati *Vasanta-vilāsa.* Painters turned prolific with such subjects as the amours of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* whether in the original Sanskrit, or in annotated or translated form, came in for illumination in different regions of India. A profusely illustrated copy of the purāṇa, furnished with the 'Bhāvārtha-dīpikā', was prepared in 1705 Sambat/1648 A.D. at Udaipurnagar; this is preserved in the Bhandarkar Institute at Poona, which possesses another finely illustrated manuscript in Persian, dated 1909 Sambat, giving a prose summary of the purāṇa. The most absorbing part of the whole purāṇa, the tenth skandha, found special favour with the artists. A Gujarati verse-rendering by Bhālaṇa with 17th century miniatures, and another copy of this skandha with notes in Old Gujarati (1611 A.C.) with 200 miniatures have been noticed (Gode, *N.I.A.,* 1, 4).

In Assam also Vaiṣṇavism brought in the practice of illuminating the holy books with small illustrative paintings. Śaṅkaradeva is also believed to have been a painter. On one occasion he is said have painted on tulāpāt or ginned cotton paper scenes of 'seven Vaikuṇṭhas'. On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant, and pasted it on a wooden book-case to be presented to his royal patron, Naranārāyaṇa. He also had scenes of Kṛṣṇa's life in Vṛndāvana woven into a sheet of cloth 180 feet long with a caption for each miniature. The illustrations in a copy of Śaṅkaradeva's rendering of the first half of the tenth skandha of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* found in the Bāli-sattra of the Bardowā group, have been reproduced in print in a recent publication, *Citra-bhāgavata.* The original copy bore the date 1461 Śaka/1539 A.C., which seems to be too early; the work may suitably date from the late 17th century. The technique and finish of the work exhibit strong all-India affiliations, although here and there local conventions are naturally to be expected. There is some amount of convention and stylisation, which, of course, counts for a limitation on the art. The figures are mostly in profile. Physiology is not much heeded to, and physiognomy scarcely shines bright. There is a rhythm in the charming scenes of musical and dancing performances, which also exhibit some mudrās. Movement of groups is dynamically depicted. Landscape or any other background in perspective is scarcely or never attempted. Successive scenes are flatly brought on the same plane in arched or zigzag panels. Representations of pouring rain water, rivers and lakes are of a conventional type. Mountains look like cross sections of them as in geological diagrams. The conventions of angularity in figure drawing, fish-shapes eyes, arched eye-brows, pointed nose and sloping forehead, as Dr. Motichandra point out, speak of ancient tradition, and "the lyrical draughtsmanship, simple composition, dramatic narration and splendid colours give the *Bhāgavata* illustrations a charm which distinguished them from similar *Bhāgavata* paintings from Udaipur and elsewhere."

It is evident that these paintings were done in some sattra, most probably in the Bāli-sattra, where the original manuscript was preserved. There is a copy of the original purāṇa with Śrīdhara's commentary, which has illustrated margins in the Karchung-sattra in Nowgong; a copy of *Śrī-bhāgavata-matsya-carita* by Nityānanda Kāyastha of Māyāmarā-sattra (1644-50), of which the wooden covers and some extra folios are furnished with paintings of several of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu and other figures, was found in the Dinjay-sattra; a copy of Rāmānanda Kāyastha's *Kumara-haraṇa* is preserved in the Bāreghar-sattra. It is thus seen that Assam Vaiṣṇavism developed a school of painting of its own; and this art was later patronised by the Āhom monarchs and Koc chiefs of the 17th and 18th centuries.

In some sattras were to be seen mural paintings and wood-carvings of some beauty and with folk-art elements in them. The Barpeṭa-sattra kīrtana-gṛha, which has now been demolished, was decorated with many finely engraved and painted wooden panels, depicting scenes from religious texts. Barpeṭā also saw the growth of the art of ivory carving. Paintings also were provided on wooden posts and post-plates, book-rests, raised trays used for the purpose of making offerings (śarāi), and pleasure-boats.

The Vaiṣṇava Renaissance thus reached out to all fields of cultured and developed life in Assam, enriched them, and brought about altogether a unifying and glorifying vitality to this part of the great Bhāratavarṣa.

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The Satra Institution of Assam

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THE Satra institution of Assam is a product of the Vaiṣṇavite movement initiated by Śankardev towards the closing decade of the fifteenth century of the Christian era. The institution has, since its inception, been serving as the radiating force of all religious activities of the Vaiṣṇavite communities.

The Satras resemble to a certain extent the Vaiṣṇavite *mathas* and *ākhārās* of other parts of India. Each satra consists of three principal parties or categories of persons intimately connected with the welfare and management of the satra. These parties are—(1) *satrādhikār,* (2) *bhakats,* (3) *śiṣyas.* The first two parties generally reside within the four walls of the satra campus, while the last party live in scattered villages leading the ordinary life of a house-holder. The head of a satra is popularly known as *adhikār.* His position is similar to that of the *mohunt* of the *matha* institution or the abbot of the Christian monasteries. He is the religious head and spiritual guide of the flock under his care. He initiates disciples and conducts all important religious functions. The second party, viz., *bhakats,* consists of those devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office under the satra, or lead an intensely devotional life within the campus of the satra, observing celibacy throughout their life. In purely monastic satras where celibacy is strictly observed, the number of such *bhakats* or celibates are more numerous than those of the semi-monastic or non-monastic satras. Such celibate devotees are popularly called *kevaliyā bhakat.* The word *kevaliyā* is derived from Sanskrit *kevala,* i.e., lone or unattached. These celibates are recruited in their teens by elderly celibates and under the guidance of the latter, they remain as apprentices for a few years to learn the manners, customs as well as the religious secrets of the cult. The lay devotees or disciples of a satra are called *śiṣya.* Every Assamese Vaiṣṇava family is invariably affiliated to one or the other of the five hundred and odd satras of Assam.

Structural Features

The structural pattern of a satra is marked by the existence of a *nāmghar,* a *maṇikuṭ,* a *karāpāṭ* and two to four rows of *hāṭīs.* The centre of all religious activities of a satra is the *nāmghar.* It is a long open hall with gabled roof and an apsidal facade. It serves as a prayer hall as well as the seat of all meetings and discussions. The actual shrine where the image of the deity and the sacred scriptures are kept is called *maṇikuṭ.* It is comparatively a smaller structure adjoined to the eastern or southern end of the prayer hall (*nāmghar*). The prayer hall and the shrine are modelled on the structural pattern of Hindu temple which consists of a *garbha-gṛiha* containing the image and a *maṇḍapa* hall. The *Nāmghar* with its apsidal facade and the *maṇikuṭ* attached to it exactly resembles the main temple of Kāmākhyā with a similar apsidal *maṇḍapa* hall adjoined to the main shrine. On the four sides of the satra campus stand four rows of huts known as *hātī* where *bhakats* of various categories reside. In satras of monastic type where only celibates are allowed to reside, the *hāṭīs* are entirely inhabited by celibate devotees, but where celibacy is not strictly enforced, one or more sides of the campus are reserved for married devotees. In most of the existing satras, however, the system of constructing *hāṭīs* is not strictly enforced. The entrance leading to the interior of a satra is usually marked by a small open house known as *karāpāṭ* (Sk.-kapāṭa). Distinguished guests are first received at *karāpāṭ* and then, they are escorted to the interior.

The following description of the Garamur satra, as given in the *District Gazetteer of Sibsagar*, 1905, may be cited as a representative description of a monastic satra in Assam.[1]

"The buildings of the satra are approached by a good road which is constructed at some expense. The *nāmghar* is a huge structure, the roof of which is supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor-space is entirely bare save for one or two lecturns on which the sacred writings are reposing. The actual shrine is a separate building closely adjoining the eastern end of the *nāmghar*. The shrine is very different from the penetralia of the *Śākta* temple. There is no trace of blood or grease ; there is nothing disgusting or grotesque and the whole place is dominated by the note of decency and propriety which is so marked a characteristics of Vaiṣṇavism of Mājuli. In a square round the gardens stand the lines of huts in which the resident monks live. They consist of well-built rows of rooms which are much more spacious than those ordinarily occupied by village folk and are kept scrupulously clean. There is singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere. Everything is fresh, neat and well-to-do. The well-groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large. The children are recruited from villages and trained to be devotees, but if at any time they find the restraint of celibacy irksome they are at liberty to return to the outer world."

Use of the word satra

The term *satra* is a Sanskrit word where it is used in two senses : firstly in the sense of an alms-house or charitable institution and secondly in the sense of a sacrificial session lasting for several days or more. The latter sense is responsible in lending the nomenclature to the Vaiṣṇavite institution of Assam. It has been stated in the opening chapter of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* that during the course of a sacrificial session at the forest of Nimiṣā, Suta-Ugraśravā expounded the above purāṇa to the assembly of sages.[2] The fact that a sacrifice called *sattra* proceeded concurrently with the act of expounding the *Bhāgavata* easily led people to think that a *sattra* and an assembly of devotees listening to the exposition of the *Bhāgavata* are identical. Śaṅkardev probably initiated the Vaiṣṇava movement by reciting and expounding the stories of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* to a band of followers who clustered around him to listen to his religious discourses. The part played by Śaṅkardev probably reminded the listners of the part played by Suta-Ugraśravā in the assembly of holy sages. Under the above erroneous impression devotees began to term an assembly of devotees where the *Bhāgavata* used to be read and discussed as a *sattra,* even though the word actually meant a form of sacrifice. The etymological meaning of the word *sattra* which means a sitting or a session (√ *sad*=to sit+*tra*) or an instrument which liberates the good (*sat*=good,+ √ *trai*=to liberate) must have supplied additional reason for forming the above notion. The Śanskrit word *sattra* very naturally became *satra* in Assamese.

Stages of evolution

The first stage of the growth of the satra institution began with Śaṅkardev. But during his life time the religious association organised by him had not taken the shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. Śaṅkardev no doubt laid the foundation of the institution, but the superstructure was raised during the succeeding generations. Mādhavdev who succeeded Śaṅkardev as the head of the Vaiṣṇavite sect did not preside over any satra left by Śaṅkardev. It was at the time of Mādhavdev and Dāmodardev that the satra institution approached the second phase of its development. There are definite references in mediaeval biographies of saints to the part played by Mādhavdev and Dāmodardev in giving a definite shape to the structural as well as organisational side of the satra institution.[3] Mādhavdev, besides reconstructing the Barpeta satra on a permanent basis, systematically divided the prayer services into fourteen units and made necessary arrangement for the smooth running of the satra.[4] Simultaneously, Dāmodardev also systematised the management of his satra by allotting definite function to different individuals and arranged and definitely fixed the procedure of religious service to be conducted daily in his satra.[5] The satra institution took a definite monastic turn in the hands of Vaṁśi-Gopāldev who introduced some changes in his Kalabari satra in eastern Assam towards the third decade of the seventeenth century. His satra at Kuruwabāhi, established later, provided rooms for five hundred celibate devotees.[6] The final phase of the growth of the satra institution was reached with the extension of royal patronage to all important satras. The successive Ahom kings placed at the disposal of different satras certain number of persons to act as *pāiks* (persons engaged to render definite service) and granted lands free of any charge. This act of royal patronage placed many satras on a sound economic footing. But, to look into the affairs of satras and to keep the court well-informed of situations at different satras, an officer known as *satriyā Barua* was appointed. Thus, some sort of contact developed between the royal court and the satras.

Functions of Satras

Functions of the satra institution may be classified into two categories, viz., primary and secondary. Its primary functions are to propagate Vaiṣṇavism based on monotheistic principle, to initiate disciples, to provide ethico-devotional codes and rules of conduct for the neophytes and to hold religious festivals on different occasions. Satras have been acting more or less as the guardians of religion and morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples. By maintaining regular agents at different localities and by personal visits the heads of satras tried to elevate the spiritual and moral standard of the villagers. The secondary functions of the satras are to see that good social relation is maintained amongst the villagers, to develop the spirit of co-operation, to provide adequate facilities for the dissemination of ancient learning and to dispense justice on all social and religious controversies. Before the introduction of the British system of administering justice, satras tried many cases relating to social matters.

Management and Income

The present income of satras is mainly derived from two sources. These two sources are, (1) income from lands originally granted by the kings of the pre-British days and subsequently confirmed and recognised by the British Government ; (2) income from religious tithes contributed by disciples. Besides the above two sources occasional donations and subscriptions from disciples and devotees constitute a minor source of income. All important satras possess in varying degrees land-grants ranging from a few acres to several thousand acres of land, some of which are completely free of revenue charges.[7] The second source yields income according to number of disciples and followers. Every disciple is expected to make a small contribution annually in cash or kind to his satra. The demand is small enough and does not generally exceed a rupee in cash or a few seers of rice or some wearing apparel. Formerly, the payment of *guru-kar* (tithe) was considered as indispensable as the payment of government revenue, though there was no legal obligation to pay that sum. In recent years, however, the income from the second source has considerably gone down as people now seem to be less conscious of religious obligations to their satras.

For the efficient management of the satra and for conducting religious services regularly the head of a satra, in consultation with the senior devotees, appoints from among his disciples, functionaries to manage different departments of the satra. There are several gradations of such functionaries, who according to status or rank, exercise control over their respective departments. Contacts between disciples of far-flung villages and the satra is maintained through a set of functionaries selected from the villagers themselves.[8] All the functionaries are usually nominated by the head, but in some satras they are selected on the basis of election.

Ownership and Property

There are three types of ownership ; (1) ownership vested on the chief idol of the deity of the satra ; (2) ownership vested on the community of devotees ; and (3) family ownership. In the first case, the satra theoretically belongs to the idol of the deity, to whom the entire property of the satra is dedicated. In the second case the ownership of a satra is in some cases collectively vested on the community of devotees with the *satriyā* or the *adhikār* as the nominal head. The third type of ownship is prevalent in most of the satras where the headship devolves on hereditary principle and the satra is managed by a particular family. The head in the first type of ownership is a trustee of the satra-property in the name of the image of the deity. The powers exercised by the head of such a satra is mostly determined by long-standing customs and practices. In the second type of ownership, the power of the head is very much limited.

Contributions of the Satras

The part played by the satra institution in other spheres, besides religion, deserves notice. During the last few hundred years of its existence, it has enriched Assamese life socially and educationally and has contributed a great deal to the realm of literature and art. One of the most notable social contributions of the satra institution is the upliftmen of the backward classes. The so-called untouchables and backward classes were freely taken into the fold of Vaiṣṇavism. Though inter-dining and inter-marriage between different castes were not prescribed, yet the spiritual bond and fellow-feeling fostered by satras reduced to a considrable extent the rigour of caste distinction. Another notable social contribution of the institution is its services amongst some of the tribes of Assam. Non-Aryan tribes like the Koch, the Morān, the Chutiyā, the Āhom and the Kachāri were brought under the fold of Vaiṣṇavism and Vaiṣṇavite missionary activities were also conducted amongst tribes like the Miri, the Nāgā, and the Āitoniyā. In Śaṅkardev's translation of Book II of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa,* we find a significant stanza wherein the tribes of Assam have been mentioned as attaining liberation under the influence of Vaiṣṇavism.[9] Aniruddha Bhuyan, the founder of the Māyāmarā sub-sect confined his proselytising activities to the north-eastern region of Assam, mostly occupied by the Chutiyās, the Morāns and other indigenous non-Aryan tribes. The satras, affiliated to the *Kāla-Saṁhati* branch of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism, notably Dihing, Cecā, Budbārī, Bāreghar and Kāṭanipār, deserve special mention for their missionary activities amongst the backward and tribal people.

The satra institution contributed considerably to the spread of learning and education in medieval Assam. All principal satras used to maintain Sanskrit *ṭols* and services of reputed scholars were requisitioned to run those *ṭols*. A satra was a religious centre, a school and a library also. Not only existing books were preserved with care, but books were also imported from other places of India. The books were not left to lie fallow. They were industriously and assiduously copied and worn-out ones were replaced by new copies. In the field of literature, the contribution of satras is no less considerable. Devotional lyrics, dramas and religious kāvyas were composed and dramatic performances were regularly held to the delight of the mass. It became a customary practice with every *satrādhikār* to perform a play, composed by himself, to mark his accession to the religious headship of the satra. Biographies of saints (*carit-puthis*) and satra-chronicles (*satra-vaṁśāwalī*) are also important contributions of satras. The arts of music and dance also received considerable impetus from satras. Satras developed a school of classical dance and music in Assam. It is entirely religious in outlook and motive. The art of wood and ivory carving was practised in some satras. Figures of deities and hideous masks were carved out of wood and little doll-like figures of gods and goddesses were beautifully carved out of ivory by artisans of some satras. The art of book illustration by means of miniature was scrupulously cultivated by unknown painters living within the religious atmosphere of certain satras. The epics and the purāṇas were generally illustrated and pictures are available in all combination of colours. The artists were more concerned with his narratives than with the exhibition of his accomplishment. Mere technical skill is held in reserve in subordination to the narrative flow of pictures. In short, the cultural history of Assam in respect of fine arts and crafts, of education and learning, since the beginning of the sixteenth century till the advent of the British, largely developed centering round the Vaiṣṇava movement which in turn found expression through the satra institution.

The history of the satra institution since the beginning of the nineteenth century was marked by a growing spirit of conservatism and orthodoxy in place of catholicity which characterised the early history of the institution. Women and so/called socially backward people were debarred from entering the prayer halls of the satras. Intolerance towards the beliefs of other sects, undue importance paid to tradition and formality, ignorance of learning, rampant superstition, love of luxury and ease, lack of missionary zeal on the part of *satrādhikārs* and their associates and similar trends were also noticeable. The satra therefore no longer enjoys the same enviable status which it used to do formerly.

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Assamese Language and Early Assamese Literature

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Assamese Language

ASSAMESE language developed out of the Sanskrit language as early as the 7th century A.D. Its direct ancestor, however, is Magadhi Apabhramsa. According to Grierson "Magadhi was the principal dialect which corresponded to the Eastern Prakrit. East of Magadhi was spoken Pracya Apabhramsa. It spread to the south and south-east and here became the parent of modern Bengali. Besides, spreading southward Pracya Apabhramsa also spread to the East keeping north of the Ganges and reached the valley of Assam where it is represented by Assamese. Each of the three descendents of Magadhi Apabhramsa, Oriya, modern Bengali and Assamese is equally directly connected with the common immediate parent" (L.S.I., vol. I, Part I, pp. 125-126). Dr. S. K. Chatterji divides Eastern Magadhi Apabhramsa into four dialect groups. Three of these are related to the dialects current in Western, Central and Eastern Bengal and Orissa, and the fourth was related to dialects prevalent in Assam and the neighbouring parts which are to-day in North Bengal. Dr. Banikanta Kakati has shown that in a pre-Bengal and pre-Assamese period there were certain dialect groups which may be designated as Eastern Magadhi Apabhramsa. Each dialect group, was in due time clearly demarcated and so Assamese "under her independent kings and her social life entirely self-contained, became established as an independent speech."

Thus, the antiquity of the Assamese language goes back to the 7th century A.D. During the first half of the 7th century A.D. on the invitation of the then Assam king Bhaskaravarman, the Chinese pilgrim Hieuen Tsang visited the province. In course of his reference to various aspects of the kingdom of Kamarupa, he spoke of the language as slightly differing from that of Mid-India. From this account of Hieuen Tsang, it can be known that by the 7th century A.D. the Indo-Aryan language had penetrated into Assam, that this Aryan language spoken in the province differed to a certain extent from the Magadhi dialects then current in Mid-India. The archaic specimens of the Assamese language are discoverable in the place-names and proper-names occurring in the old inscriptions. Other specimens of the language of its formative period are manifest in the songs and aphorisms composed by the Buddhist Sidhacaryas between the 8th to 12th centuries A.D. and commonly known as *Caryas* and *Dohas* found in *Hajar Bacharer Purana Bangla Bhasai Baudha Gan O Doha* and in *Dohakosa* first compiled by M. M. Haraprasad Sastri. Bengali scholars consider these *Caryas* and *Dohas* to be the specimen only of early Bengali language. But careful scrutiny will make it clear that their language, commonly called *sandhyabhasa* (Twilight Tongue), represents the latest phase of Magadhi Apabhramsa, and as such it includes to a considerable extent, the earliest forms of the Eastern group of modern Indo-Aryan languages, namely Bengali, Assamese and Oriya, Dr. Banikanta Kakati has ably shown how certain phonological and morphological traits registered in these songs have come down in unbroken continuity to modern Assamese.

The people of Assam, represented a mixture of different races speaking various languages like Austric or Mon-Khmer (one of which is Khasi), Sino-Tibetan representing Bodo or Kachari speeches and the Tai or the Ahom. It is therefore, natural that these languages would greatly influence the phonological and morphological characteristics of Assamese, a branch of the Indo-Aryan. Dr. Kakati traces Austric elements in Assamese and holds that the vocables that are regarded in Assamese as indigenous have mostly been taken over from the Austric speakers. The Bodo and the Ahom sovereigns ruled over Assam at different times and their rule led to the enrichment of Assamese with vocables from these languages. Of all the modern Indo-Aryan languages, Assamese is at once the most compact and complex, being influenced by a large number of Austric and Tai-Tibetan tongues and dialects.

Early Literature

The Assamese language was cultivated in the royal court of Durlabhanarayana, the king of Kamata who possibly ruled at the end of the 13th century A.D. The Kamata kings encouraged poets to write verses in Assamese. Harivara Vipra, one of the court-poets of the king in a benedictory verse in his *Babrubahanar Yuddha* speaks, "Glory to king Durlabhanarayana, the hero of Kamarupa. May he in happiness reign thousand years, in company of his sons and admirers ! Living (happily) in his kingdom, Vipra Harivara pays homage to goddess Gauri and renders into verse the spirit of the Asvamedha-parva which is appraised only by the pious." Harivara's chief works are *Babrubahanar Yuddha* and *Lava-Kusar Yuddha*, and the legendary stories of both the works were taken from the *Jaiminiya Mahabharata*.

Hema Sarasvati, a contemporary of Harivara also praises his patron king Durlabhanarayana in *Prahlad-Carita*. Though Hema Sarasvati admitted that he adopted the story from the *Vamana-Purana*, he took much liberty in handling the original. His narration is not attractive, nor did he aspire after a chaste vocabulary ; but his work is inspired by devotional fervour. Sarasvati's *Hara-Gauri-Samvada* is a bigger work running to 900 verses. He collected the stories of this Kavya both from the *Puranas* as well as folk-lore of the land. Though it has some verses on Yogic practices, this large popular treatise catered to the unquenchable thirst of mankind for the obvious and the trite.

In the same period, another centre of learning throve in what is now Nowgong district, under the patronage of the Kachari Kings. Here with the encouragement of the Kachari King Mahamanikya (about the 14th century A.D.) the greatest of the pre-Vaisnavite poets, Madhava Kandali, undertook the stupendous task of translating the whole of the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* into Assamese verse. While in fourteenth century Europe, poets sang of the vanity of human wishes, familiar to us in the Ubi Sunt formula of the old English elegies and drearily implored mercy for their life amid phantoms and illusions, Madhava Kandali sang of a life dedicated to the service of God and man through his *Ramayana*. It may be objected that such visionary works are not purely realistic and therefore do not paint a true portrait of their age, but we have to quote Blake in answer :

> The world of dreams is better far
> Above the light of the morning star.

Madhava Kandali was the court-poet of the Kachari King Mahamanikya and was known as Kaviraja Kandali (Kandali, the King of Poets), a well-deserved designation. He was a great Sanskrit scholar and unlike other fatuous poets of the time, was never subjective and never made his works autobiographical fragments. Sankaradeva, who gave the greatest impetus to the cause of Assamese literature in the succeeding century, held him in high esteem and was charmed with his graceful and moving rendering of the *Ramayana*. The legacy of rich and beautiful diction which Madhava Kandali left in his *Ramayana* exercised a tremendous influence upon Sankardeva and his immediate successors. Its diction is—

> Though deep, yet clear : though gentle, yet not dull :
> Strong without rage ; Without overflowing full.

It is worthy to reflect that of all modern Indian vernacular translations of *Valmiki Ramayana*, Madhav Kandali's is the earliest. Hindi, Bengali and Oriya versions appeared about a century and a half later. Though so early, Madhav Kandali's translation is not at all raw, but is actually done in a sombre and unforgettable literary style. Madhav Kandali constantly kept two things before him—literary beauty and popular taste. He never allowed communal, sectarian or religious matters to override poetic beauty. His imagination, therefore, had a free and unfettered play in the selection of words, figures and imagery.

We have already noticed that Assamese is built up of diverse elements—Aryan, Mon-khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Tai or Shan. Consequently, many of the customs, religious rites, beliefs, oral traditions and folk-lore of the non-Aryan people were Aryanised and gradually incorporated into the Hindu pantheon. One such Aryanised cult is that of the snake. The Assamese worship the serpent even to-day as the goddess Manasa and a cycle of narrative poems was composed glorifying her deeds. These are sung even to-day on the occasion of Manasa worship.

Vaisnavite Literature

During the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries India had seen an outburst in the fields of religion and society. A new religion was founded on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti as revealed in the *Bhagavata Purana.* It was a progressive and democrative movement which laid emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith based on constant devotion, fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality of man. Several saints of great endowment appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Puranas into regional languages. In Assam appeared the many-gifted epoch-making saint-poet Sankaradeva (1449-1569 A.D.), a Kayastha by caste, who shaped the religious, social, cultural, and literary life of the people of the province for ages to come.

The Sankarite movement produced far-reaching religious and social effects. It gave a great impetus to the advancement of learning and literature in Assam. Sankaradeva, though a distinguished Sanskrit scholar, wrote mainly in Assamese, with the aim of bringing the Sanskrit lore to the uneducated masses. He wrote a number of texts, commentaries and translations to expound his creed and he adorned what he touched. These writings had also their practical utility. They were constantly required for regulation of duties. He was a versatile genius and wrote poetry, songs and plays.

Sankaradeva drew inspiration chiefly from the *Bhagavata* which distilled the quintessential Vedanta philosophy in a framework of popular and unforgettable legends. An early attempt was, therefore, made to translate the book into Assamese. It was really a very bold and extraordinary undertaking to render into a provincial language a venerable text written in the grand style of a classical tongue. In this connection it is interesting to note that Sankaradeva was accused before the Koch King Naranarayana by the Brahmanas as an ardent reader, teacher and translator of the *Bhagavata.*

The next outstanding literary production of Sankaradeva is the *Kirtana* (the lyrics in Praise of God's Glory) which even to-day fills the mind and heart of every Assamese with a wide and lofty spiritual elation. It is looked upon with the same fond reverence as *Ramacaritamanasa* of Tulsidasa in Northern India. There is no Assamese Hindu home which does not possess a copy of *Kirtana* either in manuscript written on *sanchi*-leaves or in print, no house which does not recite some of its verses on religious occasions and during illness.

In two other branches of Assamese literature Sankaradeva was a pioneer who nevertheless left his distinctive mark, namely, in *Ankiya-nat*, one-act play and *Bargit*, devotional song.

The *Ankiya-nats* were composed mainly for sensual and intellectual appeal. In an age when there was not much education, and even that for a small class, the *Ankiya*-plays kept the intellectual life of the people going on. These plays appealed nearly to every one, and became natural food of spiritual and emotional life of the masses. As the natural instrument of popularising culture, these plays exercised powerful influence on the educational and cultural life of the people, and finally led to the growth of the national stage, development of music and dancing. Of Sankaradeva's dramas, *Kaliya-damana, Patni-prasada, Rasa-Krira, Rukmini-harana, Parijata-harana, Rama-vijaya* are now extant. The story of each play being predetermined and presentation being mainly confined to ecclesiastical propaganda rather than artistic representation, dramatists had to work under serious limitations. Sankaradeva was a preacher first and artist afterwards. Nevertheless, even under these limitations, in some of his plays, Sankaradewa could break new grounds, and although first used mainly as a means of promoting the cause of Vaisnavism, the *Ankiya-nats* have come to exercise abiding influence on Assamese life even to this day.

The *Bargits* are far more poetical than the kavyas, and more passionate even than the *akhyanas* of *Kirtana.* The growing popularity of music and the requirements of the devotional services made Sankaradeva compose a large number of *Bargits,* the most beautiful psalms in our literature even to-day. Sankardeva's *Bargits* deal chiefly with religious experiences, philosophic reflections on the world and mortality, poignant introspection of the self, agony of the spirit and humility for illumination. Some of them are speculative about the nature of God, His relation to man, His boundless compassion, the burden of human existence, the way of liberation and so forth. Others are exhortatory, urging men to 'chant the name of Hari', to 'think of Govinda', 'to rest on the feet of Rama', 'to leave the illusory pleasures of the world', etc. Each one of the *Bargits* invariably concludes with a fervent prayer for shelter at the feet of Govinda, and deliverance from suffering.

In *Bargits* we find Sankaradeva in his exalted moments. Here he exhibited his power of fusing philosophical thought with lyrical feelings in a language at once felicitous and graceful. Numerous are the similes, metaphors, alliterations and other figures of speech which make them enjoyable and appealing. The popularity of *Bargits* grew rapidly and a large number of such hymns were composed by later poets. Among these writers, there are also women. The best compositions are, however, from Madhavadeva, who himself was a master musician.

Madhavadeva is the next outstanding figure in the Assamese Vaisnavite movement, the favourite disciple of Sankaradeva. Assam was as enchanted with this mighty figure built up of words as Europe was by the legend of Napoleon built up of acts. He blared across the heavens, a spectacular phenomenon. He was born in 1492 A.D. at Letekupukhuri in Lakhimpur. He was originally a Sakta, but when he came in contact with Sankaradeva, the latter completely won him over to his cult. From then Madhavadeva became Sankaradeva's shadow, his most accomplished and faithful follower. The religious movement had gained a great impetus by his conversion, for in him was the force of intellect and the strength of character imperative for a great social reformer and a bulwark of religion.

A master of the traditional learning of the time, he was also a mellifluous singer. Almost against the wishes of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva remained a celibate throughout his life ; and his ideal brought into being a monastic order called *Kewaliyas* or life-celibates. After Sankaradeva, the apostolic mantle fell on him. After a long life of dedication he died at Cooch-Behar in 1596 A.D.

Madhavadeva's supreme achievement in Assamese hymnic literature is his *Namaghosa* also known as *Hajari Ghosa* (the book of a thousand couplets). It was not only widely read, but memorised and freely quoted as scriptural text, and thus, no doubt, is an enduring prop of Assamese Vaisnavism. *Namaghosa* contains a large number of hymns on repentance and entreaty, self-discipline and self-reproach, supreme value of dedication and devotion to and faith in God. In each of the hymn the lyric cry is predominant and ecstatic. The last few sections of the book serve as a litany consisting of eulogistic names of the Lord Krishna. It is universal in appeal and ethical in substance and is in perfect accord with the same class of sublime literature of the *Upanisads* and the *Gita*. Profundity of thought, unity of outlook, and music of expression mark the *Namaghosa* as a foremost work of art and a fitting monument to the poet's genius.

Madhavadeva was made a very popular figure in the Vaisnavite movement by his *Bargits*. His piety found full expression in these impassioned devotional songs. Many of his *Bargits* exhale, as a flower exhales fragrance, deep notes of contrition and humility in the knowledge of original sin and the spirit of self-surrender and consecration which alone reduces the sin to ashes. Some of them contain idyllic descriptions of Vrindaban with child Krishna at the focus. These lyrics of Madhavadeva furnished lovely portraits of the childhood and adolescence of Krishna, and they reflect the thoughts and sentiments which animate the child and the youth. The supernatural and extra-ordinary personality of the Lord Krishna of the *Bhagavata* becomes quite human and simple in these *Bargits*. The incidents in child Krishna's life, associated as they were with Nature's beauty, have here become more lively and apposite. The magic of Madhavadeva's pen has worked a renaissance of wonder and given a new import and delight to familiar episodes. Madhavadeva's *Bargits* irradiate the eternal nature of the child in the boy Krishna. The boy Krishna is like the child of to-day, simple and "His very smile showers a rain of nectar."

Next to the *Bhagavata*, the *Mahabharata* exercised very great influence on the Vaisnavite poets as this epic was also considered as a Vaisnavite Scripture. The Vaisnavite poets naturally turned it into an instrument for popularisation and propagation of their own doctrine. Many poets either translated a section from the *Mahabharata* or adopted a story therefrom to inculcate devotion to Visnu or Krishna, and to celebrate the Vaisnavite ideals of renunciation, simple living, love towards all sentient beings, charity, piety, truthfulness, pilgrimage and the study of hagiography and so on and so forth. Amongst the *Mahabharata* poets in Assamese, Kavi Rama Sarasvati was the foremost. Rama Sarasvati was a very great popular poet and also a voluminous writer who made this period famous by co-ordinating the literary activities of all the contemporary poets under the patronage of the King Naranarayana.

The translation of the *Mahabharata* gave impetus to the growth, and popularity of Assamese literature. It opened a golden vein of apocryphal tales, romances, allegories and mythology. Even modern writers of Assamese are drawing inspiration from its inexhaustible source of wisdom and delight. To the village people, this epic is not only an entertaining *kavya* but it stands also as an authoritative apocalyptic text. In the Salyaparva it has been rightly observed that this *Sastra* satisfies the religious and ethical needs and ensures material prosperity, the joys of life and spiritual deliverance.

The Vaisnava movement of Assam was an offshoot of the all-India movement and as such it accepted the canonical scripture of the Vaisnavas in general, and did not develop a separate set of theological and philosophical scripture of its own. Further, as Assam Vaisnavism placed emphasis on devotion and self-surrender, it had therefore not much scope for development of doctrinal works in large number. Of the few Synoptic Gospels that dwelt upon Vaisnava thought and theology, Sankaradeva's *Bhakti-Ratnakara* and *Bhakti-Pradip* are worthy of mention. Besides *Bhakti-Ratnavali,* Madhavadeva's *Namaghosa* is regarded as an authoritative treatise on Vaisnava philosophy. Bhattadeva's *Bhakti-Viveka* in Sanskrit and his *Bhaktisara,* Ramcharan Thakur's *Bhakti-Ratna,* Narottama Thakur's *Bhakti-Premavali* and Gopala Misra's *Ghosa-Ratna* have an established place in Assam Vaisnavism because of their scholastic and authenticated expositions.

One contribution of the Vaisnava writers to Assamese philosophical writings is the production of numerous commentaries on the *Gita,* both in prose and verse. Relevant verses from the *Gita* were first rendered into Assamese by the two saints Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva to expound their doctorine of devotion, liberation and Incarnation. But the entire text was not available in a single comprehensive volume. This was first undertaken in Assamese prose by Bhattadeva with the help of Sridhar-Svami's commentary. The verse rendering was, however, made by Govinda Misra, a native of Kāmarūpa. High poetic quality and mastery of forceful Assamese are the salient features of Govinda Misra's translation. His language is both simple, chiselled and beautiful and is easy to memorise. The prose version of *Gita* was made by Bhattadeva.

Vaikunthanath Kaviratna Bhagavata Bhattacharya, who is popularly known as Bhattadeva, and believed to have flourished between 1558 A.D. and 1638 A.D., wrote *Katha-Bhagavata* (The *Bhagavata* in prose) and *Katha-Gita* (The *Gita* in prose). Noticing the rather early times in which *Katha-Gita* was composed, Acharyya P. C. Ray, the renowned scientist and savant of India, says, "Indeed the prose *Gita* of Bhattadeva composed in the sixteenth century is unique in its kind... It is a priceless treasure. Assamese prose literature developed to a stage in the far distant sixteenth century which no other literature of the world reached except the writings of Hooker and Latimer in England."

Another very important type of literature that developed as an offshoot of the resurgence of the Vaisnava movement under the direct aegis of the *Satra* institutions was the *Carit-Puthis*, the biographies of Sankaradeva. Later the tradition continued in the lives of many other Vaisnavite saints. Recitations from the biographies of saints as source of religious inspiration to devotees are done after congregational prayers even up to this day. According to *Katha-Guru-Carita* (a prose biography of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva), it was Madhavadeva who first introduced this practice. He was the first to undertake a daily recitation of his Guru's biography.

The Vaisnavite renaissance ushered a new era in Assamese literature as in the other phases of national life. It was a spacious period. Young scholars flocked to Banaras, mastered the Sastras, acquired urban tastes and carried them back to their own State. People went on pilgrimages to come in touch with holy seers and to enlarge their mental horizons. Often the pilgrimages of poets were triumphal marches and every eminent poet in those days was sure of royal patronage. The Koch Kings were liberal patrons of the arts and learning. One may have an idea about the royal patronage by reading what Rama Sarasvati says of King Naranarayana in one of his *bhanitas*. He wrote : "My sovereign commanded me to translate the *Mahabharata* into Assamese verse. He offered to place before me all the commentaries available at the royal court. He sent cart-loads of texts to my residence and encouraged me in my work with adequate money, clothing, apparel and servants."

Under the Ahoms

The Ahoms, a group of the Shan invaders, under the hegemony of Sukhapha, first conquered the eastern portion of the country (1215 A.D. ?) and later on, his descendants ruled the entire country nearly for six hundred years. It is an undeniable fact that the Ahom rule gave Assam for several centuries a good and strong government which, resisting successively several Mahammedan invasions, kept the country in peace, prosperity and order. The Ahoms liquidated all petty principalities, both within Assam and on the tribal frontier ; and this led to the emergence of one closely knit geographical and political unit named Assam. The most notable achievement of Ahom rule was this political unification of the country which in course of years led to the social, cultural and linguistic unity. It awoke the spirit of oneness among the Assamese people.

In the beginning, the Ahoms wanted to maintain feudal superiority and separate existence as a ruling community and did not allow its members to have social intercourse with the peasant-population of the country. With the passage of time, they found it impossible to administer the vast country with a small number of their own people who came with the first conqueror Sukapha. They were, like the far-sighted Akbar, compelled to increase their number by marrying from the non-Ahom or Hindu-families, and by conferring upon some non-Ahom families the privileges and status of the ruling race. These new entrants were thoroughly assimilated with the pure Ahoms, and they and their descendants were not disabled to hold high offices and enjoy privileges to which older Ahoms were entitled. The Ahoms, in course of years, adopted Hindu manners and customs. Further, successfully resisting the spread of Islam in Assam, they regarded themselves as protector and defender of the Hindu Faith.

Nor would any historical survey of the period be complete without some account of the contribution made by the Ahom kings towards the spread of Hinduism. Hindu influence first entered the Ahom court during the reign of king Sudang-pha Bamuni-Kowar (1397-1407), who had been brought up in a Brahmana family. The Hindu influence was more marked in the reign of king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) who was personally grateful to Brahmana priests for ridding him of a demon which had possessed him during his princehood. The first Ahom king to accept Hinduism formally was, however, Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663). Jayadhvaja Singha and his successors upto Lora Raja (1679-1681) were initiated in Vaisnava faith. Gadadhar Singha persecuted the Vaisnavas, but bestowed royal patronage upon the Saktas and showed great honour and courtesy to Sakta-priests. When his son king Siva Singha (1714-1744) became a disciple of a Sakta Brahmana, the Sakta's got an ascendancy. As a result, rivalry and jeolousy began to grow between the Saktas, and the Vaisnavas, the group which enjoyed royal patronage and the group which suffered royal persecution. And when Siva Singha's queen Phuleswari insulted the Vaisnavas of the Mowamariya Sampradaya, whom she had invited to a Sakti worship, the Vaisnavites openly revolted against the Ahom crown. This religious revolt is one of the causes of the decline and fall of the Ahom power. This discrimination and religious intolerance leading to division of the spirit were reflected in the literature of the period.

It is also to be noted that the Ahoms constructed temples dedicated to Sakta gods and goddesses and these temples became the seats of Sakta culture. Sakta religious texts both in Sanskrit and Assamese were recited and explained in these temples and thus Sakta literature came to be written and developed in Assamese.

In addition, the Ahoms brought about a cultural synthesis in the country peopled by diverse creeds. It is true that the Ahom kings did not altogether abandon their ancenstral religion and practices though they adopted Hindu religion and Hindu way of life. Their coronation ceremony was solemnised both by Ahom and Hindu ritual and the Ahom ceremony of *Rikkhvan* was always performed at the crowning of a new king. Every king, on ascending the throne, assumed two names, one Assamese Hindu form and the other in Ahom. The Ahom kings considered themselves descendants of Indra and the royal dynasty came to be known as Indravamsa. The Ahom gods and legends also came to be identified with Brahmanical sagas so that both the Ahoms and the Hindu population were made to feel that after all the pantheons of the two peoples were essentially the same, the only difference being that of language and of emphasis. Thus, we find that *Chao-pha,* i.e., King of Heaven (*Svarga-deva*) was identified with *Leng-dan* or Indra, the progenitor of the Ahom kings, *Jaching-pha* was identified with Sarasvati, *Lung-chai-net* with Vayu, *Khan-khanpha-pha* with Devi, *Khun-tun* with the Sun-god and Khun-ban with the Moon-god and *Lall-khe* with Visvakarman.

In religion and ritual too they strove for a synthesis. They held sacred the Hindu scriptures, showed respect and reverence to Brahmanas and Vaisnava Mahantas, and made grants and endowments for maintenance of shrines and monasteries. Also at the same time patronised the Ahom priests, allowed them to perform their ritual and to officiate in ceremonies like marriage, death and coronation as holy men.

This spirit towards the growth of one synthetic Assamese culture was discernible also in their language-policy. The language of the Ahoms was of the Tibeto-Burman family while Assamese is an Aryan tongue. The Ahom rulers, in the beginning tried to make Ahom the language of the court and culture and *Buranjis,* chronicles of the court and other documents were actually recorded in Ahom language. But this practice was fraught with practical difficulties as the bulk of the Assamese subjects did not understand this alien language. Consequently these records and land-grant charters had to be written both in Ahom and Assamese. Later on, this policy was abandoned and Assamese completely replaced the Ahom language. The Ahom-speakers merged themselves with Aryan-Assamese-speaking population of the province. Nevertheless, words and expressions from the Ahom language found easy access into Assamese, and Ahom way of thought began to influence Assamese writings and literature, particularly in the system of writing *Buranjis.*

Another notable event of Ahom history is the successive invasions of Assam by the Muslims. These Muslim invasions indirectly did some good. Prior to the Muslim invasions there was hardly an integrated national life in Assam. The common danger filled up all breaches. The Koches, the Kacharis, the Ahoms, the Assamese—all became united under leadership of one powerful king. Petty, separatist, parochial sensibilities yielded ground to broad national consciousness. The beginnings of a synthetic Assamese culture were thus made. The common danger fostered patriotic feelings in the country and several men and women earned immortal fame by sacrificing their lives in defence of their motherland against the Moghul aggressors. Their annals inspire Assamese men and women even today.

At the time of the advent of the Ahoms, not only was the political condition fluid ; the social condition was equally chaotic and disconcerting. People had more faith in magic and charms than in effort and aplomb. The Muslim invasions roused the people once again to heroic deeds, self-reliance and patriotic organisation and indirectly freed the spirit from superstition and idle speculation. The Moghul invasion also brought Assam into contact with the rest of India again—a contact which was lost in the 11th and 12th centuries. With these invasions came into Assam the thought of other people—notably of the Islamic people on life and art, especially painting and music. There grew up in Assamese the *Jikir* and *Jari* songs based on the Sufi religious preachers. The Pirs and Fakirs had notable contributions. In this process, a large number of Perso-Arabic vocables found place in Assamese language.

The Ahoms not only defended the country against external aggression but also fortified it internally on sound lines. They built-up good and wide roads for communication and transport, organised a postal system, opened up markets, built towns and temples and reconstructed villages and reorganised the social life of the peasant population. The development of communication had important political, social and cultural significance. It brought separate population ever closer together, forged some of the strongest bonds of national unity, and awakened in them the feeling of oneness. It also widened the area of social and commercial intercourse and fostered one composite Assamese culture.

Further, small or big towns built at Gargaon, Rangpur, Jorhat, Gauhati and other places led to the growth of a new urban refinement. The Ahom nobles of easy fortune and amiable disposition and the people of these towns reflected an urban culture in their manners, etiquette, dress, living and learning. This new culture distinguished them from the rural people who were dominated by an antique uniform pattern of life, conservatism and great inertia. The new urban society, though very small, stirred the imagination of the stereotyped society to adopt readily new ideas, develop secular outlook on worldly matters, and widen contact outside its own social and religious coterie. This urban society began to take lively interest in higher things of life like art, literature and music. Kings, ministers and nobles, patronised poets and writers by making land-grants to them, and the recipient-poets and authors have eulogised their patrons in their verses. Some changes in emotional complexion came doubtless over literature devoted to a glorification of monarchs and nobles. The first change was seen in panegyric lyrics composed by such poets as Rama Misra, Kaviraj Chakravarti, Ruchinath Kandali, Vidyachandra Kavisekhara who received liberal patronage from the Ahom kings. These eulogistic writings were full of glitter and sparkle of artificial literary expression and catering mostly to the tastes of the class for whom they were written.

Moreover, Ahom court was pompous. This pomposity affected the poet's sensibilities and hence we find a note of artificiality, where, in the Vaisnavite era, there were sincerity and austerity. By advocating the ideal of austerity and poverty, the Vaisnavite literature repressed many natural pleasures. Now literature is released from such repression, thanks to the baroque extravagance of, and the preference to amatory themes by the Ahom courtiers. The court was the centre of love and romance. Kings and queens also preferred love stories to devotional ones. Therefore, the poets composed love stories or threw rain-bow colours of love to stories otherwise religious. Since the Puranas were a rich store-house of love anecdotes, Ahom monarchs encouraged poets and authors to render them into Assamese. A notable distinction between the Vaisnavite and Ahom periods is that whilst in the former the divine Ground was the subject of literary treatment, in the latter, man is the centre of literature. Literature now ceased to be other-worldly and idealistic. The shift was towards realism. Even in poems and romances, men and women of the common work-a-day-world have now engaged the poet's attention.

The greatest development in Assamese literature under the Ahoms is found in the *Buranjis,* the chronicles of the Ahom court. The *Buranjis* were compiled under the orders of kings, feudal lords and of the high dignitaries of the State, for they alone could grant access to state documents on which the chronicles had invariably to be based. These documents were principally the periodic reports transmitted to the court by military commanders and frontier governors, diplomatic epistles sent to and received from foreign rulers and allies, judicial and revenue papers submitted to the kings and ministers for their final orders and the day-to-day annals of the court which incorporated all the transactions done, important utterances made, and significant occurrences reported by reliable eye-witnesses (*Assam Buranji,* Introduction). *Buranjis* constitute an unprecedented golden chapter in Assamese literature. It is through these *Buranjis* that the modern Assamese prose emerges in full panoply. Commenting on this unique historical literature Sir G. A. Grierson observes : "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient. The historical works or Buranjis are numerous and voluminous. A knowledge of Buranjis was an indispensable qualification to an Assamese gentleman." (*Linguistic Survey of India*).

The compilation of *Buranjis* was a sacred task, and, therefore it was customary to begin it with a salutation to the deity. The chronicles were prepared generally by men who commanded a comprehensive knowledge about state affairs, and we have several *Buranjis* whose authors were high government officials. Hence the language of these chronicles is dignified and graceful. Records as they are of concrete facts, they have been put in a language which is ordinarily free from sentimental rhetoric. Couched in easy, straightforward, and unambiguous language, they are charming and admirable writings.

There is another class of historical writings composed both in verse and prose generally known as *Vamsavali.* Besides, recording the geneological history of the different families of the kings, the *Vamsavalis* sketch the lives and careers of the important nobles. It seemed important for various reasons to preserve an authentic record of the noble families for receiving royal grant and office. These *Vamsavalis* thus supplement information which is not available in the *Buranjis.* Such a notable *Vamsavali* is *Darang-Raj-Vamsavli* composed in verse by Suryakhari Daivajna during the latter part of the eighteenth century under patronage of Samudranarayan, the Koch king of Darrang. The original manuscript of the book was embellished with beautiful illustrations, "The *Darang-Raj-Vamsavali,*" writes Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, "has been an invaluable source book for all studies connected with the early history of the Koch rulers."

Many Sanskrit books other than the scriptures and religious texts came to be translated into Assamese prose under the royal patronage. They deal with medicine, astronomy, arithmetic, dance and architecture. In these books for the first time Assamese prose was employed as a vehicle for utilitarian knowledge. Apart from their value as literary documents and technical pamphlets they are most important as specimens of contemporary prose for scientific expression. The chief is *Hastividyarnava* of Sukumar Barkath. This illustrated book was compiled in 1734 A.D. under orders of king Siva Singha and his consorts, Queen Ambikadevi.

Side by side with the texts on medicine, books were compiled on astrology and divination both in Sanskrit and Assamese. Even treatises on medicine include chapters on astrology in as much as they discuss the astral nature of diseases which begin under various asterism.

Divintion was also resorted to for prognosis and cure of diseases. Incantations, *mantras,* were also practised to cure diseases. *Mantras* were further used to exercise devils and spirits who were supposed to be the cause of human ailment, to cure snake-bite, to remove the scourage of bad dreams, to secure release from misfortunes, to free the fields from pests, for domestic prosperity, rich harvest and for hundred and one other purposes. The Ahom chronicles as well as the reports of the Muhammedan historians testify to the use of charms for bewitching the army of the enemies and even oppressive officers were killed through spells or witchcraft. An Aom *Buranji* while recording the proceedings of a trial for conspiracy to subvert the authority of the reigning sovereign, reproduces the following deposition of a witness. "I am told that one Baga possesses an old *puthi* with the help of which all can be subdued, including the king and his subjects." A mass of writings on *mantras* was therefore, created both in prose and verse. An idea of the volume and variety of *mantra* literature can be had by reference to a few of the more important titles : *Sapar-dharani-mantra, Karati-mantra, Sarvadhak mantra, Kamaratna-tantra, Bhutar-mantra, Khetra-mantra;* this list might easily be extended. It is true that these compilations on incantations, spells, nostrums and conundrums have no literary value, but they are interesting as documents of social degeneration, insidious folk-beliefs, and popular superstitions.

To sum up, six hundred years of Ahom rule presents a panorama of rapid development in all departments of life. The most distinctive aspects of the period, as noticed earlier, were the geographical and racial unification of the country, stabilisation of the political institutions, organisation of the economic, social and religions systems, and finally the rise of nationalism. The elements contributing for the growth of nationalism were such diverse factors as they Mughal invasions, the coming of Islam, expansionist attitude of the kings and a general awakening in the country. As one should expect, the rationalistic temper of the age had a direct effect on arts and literature which enriched and sweetened the life of the people.

The intellectual and artistic expressions of the period may be known alone from the production of numerous manuscripts. The manuscript production which required much artistic and orthographic ability and calligraphic skill, itself was an achievement. The production of a manuscript was a laborious process involving leisure and money. Large number of manuscripts could be produced only with royal munificence. Each manuscript produced in the royal court even now is a priceless treasure of art for its calligraphy and even for the materials on which the words were written.

It should also be noted that with manuscript-production was intimately connected the art of painting, some of the magnificant illuminated manuscripts produced during the period are *Gita Govinda, Samkhasura Vadha, Bhagavata, Darang-Raj-Vamsavali, Hasti-vidyarnava.* The paintings of these manuscripts were devoted not exclusively to religions pictures, but also included lovely portraits of kings and court-life.

From the stand-point of literary history, however, the distinctive features of the age are the growth of prose and secular literature, the tendency to exalt the individual, particularly saints and kings and the dawn of scientific curiosity. Along with prose, naturally came fresh interests in diverse utilitarian and scientific fields. The study of mathematics and architecture were the first step towards this direction. With astrology were cultivated elements of astronomy and in the treatises of *Jyotisa,* the authors described admirably planetary motions, and natural phenomena with the limited knowledge at their command. In the treatises on *Ayurveda,* pharmaceutical, botanical and zoological observations were also made—together with therapeutic and pharmacological reflections.

Folk Literature of Assam

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(1)

ASSAM'S folk-literature is fairly rich. A considerable amount of it has been recorded, and though the primitive character of an agricultural society has been modified by Hinduism and though the original significance of certain pre-Aryan ceremonials has been lost, many of the old songs have survived, while Hinduism itself has inspired new compositions. Of course, the language of this oral literature has changed along with the times, as in other lands.

There are various types of songs : songs of marriage, songs of religious ceremonies, lullabies, the Bihu-nam, ballads, and so on. The Nichukani or lullaby is often meaningless, but it reveals a tenderness of feeling and imagination which transforms the ordinary jingle into something incantatory and poetic. Some of the lullabies are addressed to the moon and birds. The one below is addressed to Jonbai or Sister Moon :

> Jonbai dear, let me have a needle.
> Why a needle ?—To sow a wallet.
> Why a wallet ?—To fill with coins.
> Why coins ?—To buy an elephant.
> Why an elephant ?—To ride about.
> Why to ride about ?—Thus I become a big man.
> What a big man does ?—He beats upon the drum in the
> evening *dudum-dum.*

The large drum referred to is kept in the Nam-ghar or prayer-hall. There is a long rhyme which has the character of a formula tale. It has also an Oriya parallel and goes somewhat like this :

> O Flower, O Flower,
> why don't you blossom ?
> The Cow nips my shoots,
> why should I blossom ?
> O Cow, O Cow,
> why do you nip the shoots ?
> The Cowboy does no feed me,
> why should I not nip ?...

There are lullabies with references to Boy Krishna. Allied to these rhymes are the game songs, used by children in their games. It may be possible to discover survivals of primitive religious ideas if these rhymes and jingles are analysed carefully.

Scholars have tried to find traces of ancient myths and rituals in children's rhymes and game songs. The frequent mention of the moon in Assamese lullabies may point to some primitive belief in the moon; the frog's association with the clouds is a living belief even now, frog marriage being celebrated when there is a dearth of rain. Lewis Spencer observed that from Kent to Pekin, a rhyme is current in which children threaten or request a snail to put out its horn. An English version runs thus :

Snail, snail, put out your horn,
Or I'll kill your father and mother the morn.

The rhyme is found in slightly altered versions among peoples like the French, the Italian, the Rumanian, the Russian, and the Chinese. The snail has been regarded as typifying the dawn stealing from its cavern or as symbolical of birth. It is not known if a parallel is found in Assam, but the following about a kind of ant has been heard from children :

Old Insect, come out, come out,
I'll give you rice, I'll give you fish.
Come out.

Does the Assamese rhyme have the same symbolism as the other one?

(2)

The tenderness which characterizes Nichukani is also seen in Biya-nam or marriage songs. The marriage is a musical affair. At every stage of the celebration—from the early negotiations to the final leave-taking of the bride—women sing appropriate songs. There is usually a Nāmati or leader of the chorus who sets the melody while the others follow her. The language of the songs is so homely and racy that it is difficult to translate them. They have also been influenced by the Vaisnavite scriptures of medieval times. When the bride is bathed ceremonially womenfolk sing such a song :

After her bath the maid asked her mother :
"What clothes am I to put on?"
"Such that dry in the shade and hide in the clasp
You are to put on."
After her bath the maid asked her mother :
"What flowers am I to put on?"
"Not the *seuti*, not the *malati* either,
She does not put on the *kharikajai*,
In the midst of the seas is the *parijat*,
That you are to put on."
The loving brother put out on his boat,
He went in search of the *parijat*;
The banana sprout reaches to the sky,
To the waist reaches her hair;...

One aspect of the marriage is seen in the teasing songs with which women from the groom's house or from the bride's house try to irritate the women of the other house. These are known as Khija-git in Lower

Assam and Jora-nam in Upper Assam. They are satirical in intent and very amusing. That a considerable part of the oral literature of the world is women's contribution is evidenced in the facility with which womenfolk add to the traditional stock of marriage songs and compose fresh types of teasing songs.

Womenfolk sing a large variety of songs on the occasion of popular religious ceremonies connected with Goddess Small-pox, Lakhimi or Apeswari. The small-pox goddess is known as Ai or mother, Lakhimi symbolizes paddy and welfare and Apeswari is a sort of fairy invoked in times of children's illness. Songs associated with these goddesses are steeped in the sentiment of reverence and also highly imaginative. Ai is said to have seven sisters and often she is one of these seven sisters, as is seen in the following song :

> They are coming : Ai's seven sisters, across the seven mountains,
> All bow their heads—the grass and creepers and trees, for Ai is coming,
> The golden butterfly—round it circles on its two silvern wings ;
> The Ais have come to visit the places : we beg our life of them.
> Unconsciously did we trespass into Ai's garden, unaware did we pick the buds ;
> Forgive our crime this once, O Bhavani, we fall at your feet ;...

(3)

The Deh-bichar song, or song on the consideration of the body, is a philosophical type and has its roots in a Tantric background, though now overlaid with Vaisnavite influence. Wandering mendicants (bhakat) belonging to certain esoteric sects are seen to sing Deh-bichar songs to the hypnotic melody of the Tokari, a stringed instrument. They teach that "with the guidance of the Guru does one find the essence of the body," and in their cryptic songs refer to the arteries and doors of the body, thus indicating their Tantric affiliations. There are some Muslims who also echo these sentiments, though their songs (known as Jikir) are traced to the teaching of one Ajan Phakir, a Pir who had come to Assam about three centuries ago. Some of these songs refer to incidents in the life of the Pir and may be termed ballads.

(4)

Perhaps the most lyrical type of Assamese folksongs is the Bihu-nam, associated with the Ba'hag Bihu or Spring festival. The middle of April ushers in the Indian New Year and this period coincides with the Bihu festival of the Assamese. Not the Holi, but the Bihu, which has the greater hold on the feelings of the people of Assam. The Bihu is held from the last day of C'at (Chait) to the sixth day of Ba'hag (Vaisakh), and this period is popularly known as Ba'hag Bihu. The Assamese celebrate altogether three Bihus, the second in importance being that held in Magh, after harvesting is over.

In its social manifestation the Bihu now has a Hindu colouring, but the institution has its roots in the fertility cults of the primitive inhabitants of the land. It is seed time, it is time for the development of the fertility of the soil. People dance, sing, and mate, and make preparations for the ploughing season. One no longer finds all the primitive features of the festival but the dance with its erotic nature is there and the songs which are expressive of the joys of spring and youth are plentiful. In one form of the dance, extant only in limited areas, of the two girls dancing one impersonates the role of the male. In rural areas the dance used to serve as the occasion for the choice of life partners. Among the Miri tribals when there are two competitors for the hand of the same girl, the one who gets beaten in singing or drumming may have to serve for a term at the house of the successful wooer.

Some of the customs observed at the Bihu are common to both the plains Assamese and tribals. They seem to have parallels in Chinese society. The first Bihu day is called Garu Bihu and assigned to ceremonies associated with cattle welfare ; the second day is for man and known as Manuh Bihu. Social visits start on the second day ; on the first day are eaten certain articles like green mango, neem leaves and pulse. The Chinese New Year has days similarly assigned. The first day is the birthday of cocks, the second of dogs, the third of swine. On the fourth day people visit friends and relatives. The seventh is the birthday of men ; one should not go out this day. This day moreover they eat red beans. Clearing of debts, feasting and merrymaking in general are seen both in Assam and China. Scholars have observed that in ancient times in South-West China there were festivals in which young people used to dance, sing anti-phonal songs, exchange orchids and hearts. If we remember that there have been large-scale migrations from China into south-east Asia, the roots of the Assamese Bihu may be put to a Chinese or Mongoloid origin.

The Bihu-nam or Bihu songs are anti-phonal and constitute a language of love. These lyrical quatrains have a light rhythm, suited to the dance, though they may be sung at any time and on any occasion, especially by boys and girls of the countryside. They throw considerable light on the social and even economic life of the people. Being the language of love, the Bihu-nam describes beauty, adores the sweetheart, expresses yearning as it is a vehicle of feelings of frustration and sorrow. Yearning seems to be the most fruitful poetic inspiration, as in :

To see you in a flash I am no lightning,
nor am I a flowing river,
flying to see you I am no bird,
with two wings to my sides.

A jacket suited to your body,
parted hair suited to your head,
a jewelled *keru* in your ear,
without sight of you
hardly a day can I pass,
how to pass a long year ?

Who would draw water for me,
who would cook my meals,
if you are not in my bedroom, dear,
who would speak kindly to me ?

The joys of the Bihu festival are also echoed in the songs :

The Bihu this year is so glorious,
the *nahar* is in blossom,
its scent so rouses my sweetie,
she tramples on her spinning-wheel.

The Bihu is a glorification of youth and youth has to be celebrated while it lasts :

How I fail to persuade you, O dear,
to me you pay no heed,
it is not a seed that it will appear again,
once it passes youth is difficult to recover.

If you would dance dance well
that your fellows may see,
life will go away—go to the land of death,
the body will be eaten up by vultures.

Similar sentiments are found in the Indonesian Pantun, cousin to the Bihu-nam.

These songs serve as a social document. An analysis of them rewards one with considerable information on the mode of life led by the rural folk. Popular beliefs and superstitions, like the use of areca-nut as love-charm, occasional abduction, paying of a bride-price, incurring debts in order to be able to marry, a high premium put on the ability to spin and weave, all are there. Even the tea-garden Sahib is noticed by these songs :

The Western Sahib went down to the West,
after drinking he threw away the bottle,
in spite of bullocks, in spite of buffaloes,
all is useless without a girl.

And here is a memory of the Non-Co-operation Movement :

Mahammad Ali, Shaukat Ali,
brother both are they,
clapped by Government into prison,
by what law, who would say ?

Akin to the Bihu-nam is the Ai-nitam, the "sad song" of the Miri tribals dwelling on the bank of the Subansiri in Upper Assam. These also express feelings of yearning and frustration characterizing the Bihu song. In matters of popular culture the tribals and the Hindu Assamese have much in common. Here are typical examples of Miri songs :

Just as one does not get water when one is thirsty, I cannot see my darling though I am yearning to see her.

> Just as the Brahmaputra flows unceasingly so also thoughts from my tender body always flow towards you.
>
> If I had wings or had I had been a bird I would have gone to have a look at you.

The third song utilizes the bird motif, a common device in folk poetry.

(5)

Let us pass on to another important type of folksongs—the Malita or ballad. Two of the longest ballads have as their staple magical incidents. The ballad of Phulkowar is made up of a ride on a magic horse and the hero's securing of a princess. At the touch of the prince a withered garden revives and he enters the princess's chamber in the form of a bumble-bee. The ballad of Jana-gabharu similarly describes such incidents as the hero's throwing his adversary into the sky and the latter's body turning into trees and swamps. Such magical incidents, found also in the Märchen or wonder tales, indicate that these ballads must have been composed in a fairly early period, though their language has changed along with the times. A shorter ballad—Pagala-Pagalir Git—has a contest theme, having parallels in India, Indonesia and Europe. It is a beautiful fancy woven around an imagined quarrel between a husband and a wife. It may be summarised thus :

The wife is saying to herself : "I am stretching the warp of my loom, but I've forgotten to bring the brush (with which to smooth the warp). Only for this would Pagala thrash me. Let me run away to my mother's." Pagala retorts, "You are running away to your mother's. I would lie in ambush and catch you, Pagali." "You would lie in ambush and catch me, Pagala. I would run off into the forest." "You would run off into the forest, Pagali. I would set fire to the forest and catch you." "You would set fire to the forest and catch me, Pagala. I would go up with the smoke." You would go up with the smoke, Pagali. I would catch you with a hooked pole."...

Thus they go on. If she falls into the lake, he catches her with a fishing contrivance ; if he catches her with a fishing contrivance, she becomes a shell ; if she becomes a shell, he burns her and eats her up as lime ; if he eats her as lime, she stings his cheeks ; if she stings he relieves the pain by rubbing his cheeks with oil ; if he rubs oil she takes birth as mustard seeds ; if she is born as mustard seeds he presses them ; if he presses them she takes birth as oil-cake ; if she takes birth as oil-cake he throws it away into a corner of the garden ; if she is thrown away she turns into a large tree ; if she turns into a large tree he fells it and makes a boat ; if he makes a boat she drowns him in the middle of the water. Thus victory lies with the wife. In one of the variants of the ballad the last quatrain goes thus :

> The tender leaves of the *jara*, O Pagali,
> the tender leaves of the *jara*,
> even though I wish I cannot leave
> your tender two hands.

There are also historical ballads, most of them fragments. The most important of these is the ballad of the Barphukan or Viceroy which describes the Burmese invasions of the land in the early part of the last century. It gives interesting information on the confused political situation of the time : competitiveness among the nobles, the Barphukan's invitation to the Burmese, the atrocious ravages committed by the invaders, and the helplessness of the people. There are inaccuracies in the details of history, but on the whole, the ballad treats the subject in a realistic manner and, to judge from some of the details recorded, it must have been composed within living memory of the Burmese invasions. Fragments of this long ballad were recorded by Dr. S. K. Bhuyan as early as 1910 and the whole was edited by him in 1924. The ballad lets us know that at one time there were minstrels who used to eke out their living by reciting ballads :

Let my lord give me a quarter-rupee,
I sing of the Barphukan,
it is my fortune—
my lord I've met here.

Another historical ballad describes the hanging of Maniram Dewan who had in 1857 tried to organize a revolt to oust the British from Assam.

Modern political movements have sometimes inspired the rural poet to compose songs and ballads, but these do not seem to have the wide currency which comparatively earlier specimens had. Songs of this type however did considerable service in the national movement in the early twenties of this century. The huge bonfire of foreign-made clothes in the yard of the late T. R. Phookan must have inspired a song like this :

Pat and *muga* and such foreign clothes
do not keep them in your box,
hand them on to Phookan, hand them on to Nabin,
they are burning these in their yards.

Pat and muga are local silks but the phrase to the popular mind implies foreign finery ; Nabin is the late Nabin Chandra Bardaloi. Here is another lovely specimen inspired by Mahatma Gandhi :

This fellow says, that fellow says—
Let's have a look at Gandhi,
Friend, let's have a look at Gandhi,
If I stand on the railway embankment
I can have a glimpse of Gandhi.
Let's have our eyeful of Gandhi.

(6)

Though we tend to emphasize the songs and tales, the proverbs and riddles of a people have their special significance, as they also give us an interesting glimpse into the folk mind. Take such proverbs, for example :

If the sun is hot he takes to the shade ; if he finds
a shade he sleeps ; the ploughing season must be over

> before he can persuade himself to plant in a piece
> or two of grounds.
> He says nothing that is not twisted : only twelve women
> went to draw water, now the noses of thirteen have been
> cut off !

Don't they sum up character in an excellent manner and don't they also give us a picture of rural life ? Most of these proverbs seem to have a bite in them, though some of them are neutral, just enshrining traditional wisdom, as in the following :

> Rice you will get as long as you live ; a pit you
> will get when you die.
>
> Eat well, eat well, before you are married,
> sleep well, sleep well, before you are a mother.

The following are examples from Angami Nagas :

> A woman's good conduct is her necklace.
>
> If one works hard one will have a good rice-field.

The second one has the sense that the girl who works hard is sure to get a good husband.

A Western folklorist jokingly observes that if the Indian philosopher has anything to fear, it is woman. A study of Indian popular philosophy inherent in proverbs made him observe in this manner. He does not seem to be far wrong if one takes into account such sayings from Assam :

> Do with a wife trampled on by a mother-in-law,
> taste a curry trampled on by fish.
> To dogs allow no room,
> to woman give no encouragement.
> On a stone your knife sharpen,
> tame a woman with blows.

It is a fair conclusion, however, that many of the nastiest proverbs about woman are used by women themselves !

The bachans of Dak are well known in Assam, but they are more aphoristic than proverbial. An aphorism usually enjoins rules of conduct, while a proverb only makes an observation, sometimes neutral and sometimes one-sided.

(7)

Riddles are another type of oral literature. These "things to be guessed" have a long history and in ancient India were part of the horse-sacrifice-rituals. In Assamese society Sathar or riddles are used for recreational purposes. They are sometimes found as part of tales. It is probable that, like some of the proverbs, a considerable number of the current riddles were made by scholarly persons. This is from an old manuscript :

> Having no mouth it fills its paunch,
> bearing a man's head it sleeps sound,

> this puzzle Kavikankan poses :
> let alone the fool, even the scholar is befogged.
> —*The pillow.*

The following, on the coconut, is also from the same manuscript and has a close parallel among the Rajput-Kayesths :

> Though three-eyed it is not Sulapani,
> nor the king of birds though dwelling on trees,
> holding water it is not the cloud's son,
> and it is not Ramachandra though clad in bark.

This has a variant in Bengali also, though not close ; the *Kavikankan* of the Assamese manuscript should be the sixteenth century Bengali poet Mukundaram Chakravarty. The one below, on the train, is more properly a folk-riddle :

> It is a double-current stream,
> comes whistling every day,
> all men and cattle bears away.

Here is another :

> It has a mouth, but no tongue,
> It has a belly, but no intestines.—*The pitcher.*

In Assamese there is another type of riddle-like composition, known as Phakara. Phakaras are short verses of a cryptic nature couching religious lore. They are used by Vaisnavite bhakats as well as by initiates of certain esoteric sects. They may have their ancestry in dohas of the Buddhist-Sahajiya type.

(8)

To come to the tales of the land, the subject becomes more related to the tribal background. The Assamese people are a composite entity, into which has gone a good deal of Mongoloid blood. Assamese culture shows the interplay of various cultural layers, Mongoloid, Austric, Dravidian, and Aryan. We find tales which seem to remind us of the affiliations of the culture of this land. For example, Puranic tales have been absorbed even by tribals, though with local modifications. Tales from the Jatakas or the Panchatantra have become naturalized among the Assamese, again with modifications. There are Assamese tales which show close relationship with tales recorded by Verrier Elwin in Gond areas. The trickster tales of the land seem to be a Mongoloid contribution to Assam's folk-literature.

There are various types of tales, of which the Märchen or wonder tale is the most popular, as elsewhere in the world. There are moral tales, about animals and birds, and those that explain natural phenomena, but those that give pure pleasure and treat of the world of imagination have the widest currency ; for example, the trickster tales centering round Tentan or Teton. In common parlance the word *tentan* signifies the fox type of man, sly and roguish. The incidents in the Tentan tales are found among the Assamese speaking population as among the tribals having their own languages. Here is a sample :

One day just at noon Tentan was passing through a field. A man was ploughing. His bullocks were old, the more they were pricked with the *laru* the more they dozed. In exasperation the ploughman cried out, "These bullocks deserving to go into the maw of the tiger, I wish they were dead, nor have I been able to procure a fresh pair !"

Tentan called out, "What's the matter, Brother ?"

"Oh my worries, this old pair won't move. There's a score of rupees I've laid by, but I haven't had the time to go out looking for a fresh pair."

"Brother, rub this mud on their back and they will move quicker."

The man did accordingly and the bullocks feeling the cool mud moved a few steps. Tentan then feigned that he was very much thirsty and put out his hand to reach some muddy water in the field. The man said, "Does one drink that mud ? Why don't you take a drink at my house there ?"

Tentan asked, "Will the mistress give me ?"

"Why not ?"

Tentan went into the house of the ploughman and told his wife, "Sister-in-law, Brother has just purchased a new pair of bullocks, and he has asked me to tell you to give me that score of rupees kept for the purpose."

The mistress of the house was unwilling to part with the money at the words of this unknown man. Tentan pointed to the field and explained, "See, that's a pair of white bullocks, wasn't the former pair red ?" The bullocks looked white because they were caked with mud. Nevertheless, the woman did not bring out the money.

Tentan then shouted towards the field, "Brother, she won't give—."

The man cried back, "You tiger-eaten, why don't you give ?" He thought Tentan had meant water.

The woman then secretly kept one rupee and the rest of the money she passed on to Tentan. Tentan directly left the place and made himself scarce. When the sun went down the ploughman returned home and sat at his meal. Every time his wife came out to give him extra rice or curry she would murmur, "I am clever after all, I am clever after all."

He said, "What are you murmuring about ? What's the matter ?"

"I could keep one out of that score of rupees."

"What rupees ?"

When she explained to him the whole situation he immediately left his meal and rushed out in search of Tentan...

Tentan is sometimes an impertinent young lad driven out of home by his parents and later carving out a fortune by his very impertinence, at other times he is one of two brothers cheating the other of their paternal inheritance. The monkey and the hare are two other creatures who are parallels to Tentan in wile and roguery. The tiger of Assamese tales is not very clever, as in other parts of India.

Another well known group of tales describe the sorrows and sufferings of children in the hand of stepmothers. *Tejimala* is the most popular of this type, though *Teja and Teji* agree more closely with the European *Cinderella* type of tales. Tejimala's stepmother crushes the girl under a dhenki and the buried corpse grows into a gourd creeper. When a beggar woman tries to pick a gourd, she cries out :

> Do not pick the *lau*, do not pick the leaves,
> wherefrom do you come, you beggar woman,
> only for the silk clothes did Stepmother crush me,
> poor Tejimala I am.

The creeper is later thrown away into the river where the girl blossoms as a lotus. Her merchant father while returning home is tempted to have the flower for his daughter, but the flower speaks to him. So he gets to know about the whole affair and coming home punishes his cruel wife. The girl regains her former shape. In the tale of Teja and Teji their stepmother pushes their mother into the water and turns her into a tortoise. The tortoise mother helps her children in their difficulties.

The tribes of Assam possess a considerable body of myths. Verrier Elwin has pointed out that the myths of the N.E.F.A. tribes have considerable poetic beauty and even poetic grandeur. Here is a Minyong myth from Elwin's book *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* : "At first all was water : the earth was below. Even the rocks were soft as wet mud. Kayum-Sedi-Nane-Wiyu looked on the water everywhere and tried to make the earth, but he could not. He found a spirit, Kayum-Polung-Sabbo-Wiyu, who had the form of a great mithun, and said to him, 'Make a pit with your horns that the water may flow into it.' The mithun-spirit dug such a pit and all the water drained away and the earth appeared. There was a Wiyu (spirit), Sedi-Irping-Puing-Idum-Botte, who had lived always on the face of the waters. When they dried up, he had nowhere to live and he died. His corpse turned into a mountain. From his bones came every kind of tree, from his hair the thousand grasses, and they spread as forest over the earth. Men went to cut trees and grass on the hills, at the beginning as they do now. If they do not sacrifice to Kayum-Polung-Sabbo and Sedi-Irping-Puing-Idum-Botte, these Wiyus get angry and try to turn the world again to water by shaking it." (p. 89).

Sedi-Irping-Puing-Idum-Botte in this tale is a sort of Culture Hero. An Angami myth I heard near Kohima describes the relationship of Nagas with Assamese. The ancestor of the Nagas had three sons. The old man asked them, "What will you do for a livelihood ?" The first one answered, "I shall till the soil." The second answered, "I shall be a writer," and the third's reply was, "I shall be a hunter." From the tiller of the soil were born the Nagas, the hunter disappeared into the forest, and the writer or the one who knew reading and writing became the ancestor of the Assamese. The tale tries to explain why the Nagas are illiterate. The Abors explain a similar situation by saying that the skin on which God had inscribed the letters fell into the fire and was burnt and hence they do not have letters. A lovely Khasi myth explains how the daughter of the god of Shillong Peak took birth as woman and taught the people how to dance and sing...

This is a rapid survey of the nature and range of the folk-literature of Assam. Many of the songs, of which the Bihu-nam may number more than two thousand, have been recorded ; the first collection of riddles was published as early as 1890 ; the British authors who wrote on the tribes of Assam took an interest in tales and songs ; Assam's leading author of this century published two collections of folk-tales some forty years ago ; this lead has been followed up by others. So it seems, though there is much to be done from a scientific stand-point, the folk-literature of the land has not gone out of public attention and is at present securing greater patronage.

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Some Aspects of Tribal Art in Assam

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I

ASSAM, with its landscape of deep ravines and slopes, of hills and dales, of the greens that clothe the mother earth and of the mighty Brahmaputra with its tributaries, presents a colossal and gorgeous setting for cultural make-up, an inspiration for the masterly creation of artistic objects depicting the lives of the sons of the soil. This is more so in the case of that part of the State where the Nagas live, as has been observed by Hutton, who says, "All Naga Tribes have a most remarkable appreciation of the effective and picturesque in dress, and their use of colour is usually in extraordinary good taste and particularly well adapted to the surroundings in which it is displayed. The designs of their cloths are conspicuous for the right use of brilliant colours, while their ornaments of black and white hornbill feathers, cowries, ivory and scarlet hair seem peculiarly well fitted to the deep green or bluish background usually afforded by the well-wooded hills which are their home."

The hills of Assam, decorated by beautiful scenary and full of natural resources, provide shelter to the numerous tribes like the colourful Nagas, who are famous for their valour and war-like spirit ; the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias—whose is the 'secret land where women rein' ; the Khasis and the Jaintias—whose is the 'secret land where women reign' ; the Lushais, the Kukis, the Mikirs, the Kacharis, etc. These tribes have made the Cinderella State of Assam, a living Anthropological Museum, where various peoples of diverse racial origins and of different cultural and linguistic groups live side by side. Unfortunately, most of the treasurers, more particularly the artistic objects, of this 'Museum' have not yet thoroughly been catalogued in the proper scientific method. Thus the present article with its scrappy references is limited in its scope, and will not naturally fulfil the need of a proper study of Tribal Art in Assam. Art itself is a very large subject and here I shall simply touch the fringe of the ocean of art giving a few examples mostly from the hill tribes of Assam.

The pleasure of creating and the pleasure of contemplating beautiful forms are two aspects of esthetic emotion. The two may be quite independent of each other. Among the Tribal people of Assam manifestation of artistic expressions solely to gratify esthetic impulse is rare, although not wholly lacking. There is very little art for art's sake among these people. Utilitarian motive dominates in arts besides decoration. One of the principal sources of artistic inspiration is the magico-religious emotion, which provides the creative force for artistic objects. The tribal art in Assam, thus, appears to have some functional basis.

With these ideas in mind now let us have a glimpse of the Tribal Art in Assam and also see the inter-action of the magico-religious impulse and social behaviour as conducing to the creation of artistic objects.

II

The Tribal people of Assam show their skilfulness in artistic designs in various objects which are of daily use. They are very fond of colourful dresses and ornaments of various designs, that are put in different parts of the body. It is in the domain of dress, perhaps, that the creative genius of the Tribesmen of Assam is seen at its height. Though the question of dress is more in the realm of fundamental necessities of life it is also a medium of the expression of artistic tendencies. The primary object of dress, as one and all will agree, is to give bodily comfort and protection and to fulfil the particular standard of modesty and decorum. Now in the fulfilment of such necessities the Assam Tribes have shown real skilful manifestation of their superior artistic tendencies.

An analysis of Tribal dress reveals that there are different types of dress with distinctive colours and designs, to be used on different occasions. The everyday attire is simple, utilitarian and does not convey much of artistic sense, while the ceremonial dresses are conspicuous and colourful. The colours and the designs indicate social status and rank. For instance, among the Naga Tribes, persons who have performed *genna* rites can put on special attires of attractive designs. Among the Lushais a man of distinction is allowed to wear a cloth of certain pattern made with great care and skill. A Dafla priest or *Niebu* is privileged to put on a leopard skin on his back and to carry constantly a colourful fan made of kite feathers, these being indicative of ritual potency.

Dress and ornaments of tribal Assam, more particularly of the Nagas seem to be connected with chivalry and strength which are attributes of men, the females being less conspicuously clad and ornamented. The sharp contrast in the adorments of men and women is perhaps because of the different horizons of activity of the two sexes. Whereas the females are concerned with the domestic affairs the men are concerned with extra-ordinary activities like war and chase through which they can prove their vigour and strength. Here again rank goes to determine privileged dresses. A Naga Chief's daughter, and not others, may put a petticoat of black and red colours with a blend of blue in the middle. Cowries may be sewn in the dresses of the wife of a Chief, who has performed a series of social gennas, and so on. All these decorative designs contribute greatly to the beauty of the attires, which are pieces of tribal art, but at the same time their utilitarian motives cannot be ignored.

The warrior's band of the Naga society were worn by renowned head-hunters only. The neatly woven cloth is beautifully decorated by women with a fast black dye of indigenous origin. The animals painted on these straps represent the characteristic virtues acquired by the warrior. The mithan represents smartness of a master warrior, the elephant represents strength and the tiger represents valour and ferocity. These are virtues which are prized most by any head-hunter of repute. The black dye round a white circle represents a moonlit night when a Naga warrior marches against his enemy to collect an enemy's head to enrich his family, his clan and his village community. The pointed and straight lines represent the palisades of the enemy's village which the warrior encounters in the course of his fight.

A survey of the ceremonial head-dresses of the hill tribes of Assam reveals that the head-dress itself forms a special branch of study. Among most of the tribes head-dress forms an essential of the ceremonial attire. The head-dresses are very colourful and magnificient and are of various designs. Nevertheless, the articles used in the head-dresses for decorative purpose have some magical and social implications. Thus the blood red colour of the head-dress of some of the Naga tribes is said to be indicative of rage and anger in times of war. The pair of boar tusks in the head-dress is to make the warrior as obstinate and dashing as the wild boar. Among some head-hunting Naga tribes a warrior who has performed the head-taking genna is allowed to add feathers to his wig, the number and the nature of feathers depending upon the number of heads collected. Among the Lushais also, those who have killed men in war have the right of putting head-dresses of specially decorative design.

Both men and women of the tribal folks of Assam adorn themselves with ornaments of various designs, through which not only their appreciation for beauty is reflected but social status and rank of the respective individuals are also determined. Besides, some of the ornaments have magical potentialities too. Tufts of white goat's hair bound together with red thread, that hangs round the neck of a young Lushai has its root in the idea that an affected person is cured by hanging round his neck pieces of skin of animal or feathers of bird, sacrificed to propitiate the deity responsible for the disease. In the same tribe, the tiger's tooth hung round the neck in an ornamental design has some magical bearing. Cowrie shells that are hung on the chest region of a Garo boy has its homoeopathic charm against the Evil Eye. Of course, among some tribes cowries are used as eyes in carved images of the human form.

Ear ornaments are also of various designs and made of different materials, including leaf, wood, ivory, bamboo, metal, etc. The Lushai men have their ears pierced and wear either cornelians suspended by string or wooden studs of red colour. The Lakher elders do not like to put any ear ornament, but the younger males adorn their ears upto the time of their marriage. Among some of the Naga tribes like the Sema,, the Lhota and the Ao, a very distinctive type of ear ornament is wads of the cotton-wool which sometimes, especially in case of the Chiefs, reaches the dimension of huge fans. These white cotton-wool ear ornaments form a really beautiful contrast to the black furry circlet made out of bear's hair and worn by some Sema Chiefs. Cheap brass-rings of various designs are very common among some of the tribes like the Garos, the Khasis. A Lushai woman again removes her ear-rings when she gives up the idea of remarrying.

Precise materials like gold and silver have a limited place in the fineries of the hill tribes of Assam. The Khasis, however, are rich in possession of gold fineries, which are prepared by the Khasis as well as by foreign goldsmiths. The Khasi necklaces made by combination of gold or silver and coral beads form a unique piece of adornment. The Mikirs have also similar gold and silver necklaces. The commonest form of necklace worn by the different tribal folks of Assam is made of various kinds of beads. A Lhota necklace is composed of four or five strings of black beads made from the seeds of the wild banana. Among the Semas again the cornelian bead necklaces take the principal and central position. A Sema Chief's wife often decks herself with strings of bead necklaces which almost entirely covers the breast region extending up to the belly. The inconvenience caused by such heavy fineries are often considerable. Still she can not help it for consideration of status, dignity and beauty.

Among the Lushai the old necklaces are made of very dark amber. The Garo neklaces are made of long, barrel-shaped beads of cornelian or red glass, the latter being a recent introduction.

The wearing of armlets by the males seems to carry certain social implications among most of the tribal groups. For instance, a Lyngam who has given a great feast can only wear silver armlets above the elbows. These armlets are taken off as a sign of mourning. The Garo *Nokmas* or village head-men, wear a heavy ring, usually of iron, but sometimes of brass and silver, just above elbow. A Lhota can put on a wristlet of cowries sewn on cloth only when he has performed the head-taking genna. Nevertheless, the purely esthetic motive of decorating arms and wrists is also not wanting. The Naga tribes greatly prize the wearing of ivory armlets above the elbow. Those who can not afford real ivory sometimes put on an imitation in wood of the ivory armlets. A profusion of armlets forms a part of the festive attire worn by the Khasi girls during ceremonial dances. Bangles and bracelets depicting artistic talent are also favoured by most of the tribal women of Assam.

The waist region is also not left bare. A waist-band of the Garos consists of several rows of cornelian beads, the rows being kept apart by means of a piece of carved bamboo. Similar waist-bands are in use among other tribal groups also. The designs and decorations of the waist-band are also sometimes motivated by socio-religious ideas.

Hair dressing is another form of artistic manifestation which is seen in many of the tribal folks of Assam, more particularly among the Lakhers. The men keep long hairs and dress the same by making knots of various designs. It has some social implications too. A man whose hair has been cut can not take part in some ceremonies. The Lushais also make knots. They wear varieties of articles in their knots. The commonest is a brass pin with two prongs and a head shaped like G. Skewers of ivory, bone and metal are also worn. Hair comb is also an article for ornamentation. Combs are of various shape and design and sometimes are ornamented by carving. Combs not only beautify a person, but also indicate his social rank. The magico-religious idea involved in combs is best expressed by the Lushai's idea that a man of higher clan is contaminated by a man of lower clan using his comb.

Among the Kuki tribes bare legs indicate lack of decency and decorum, while the presence of a piece of thread or cane tied just above the ankle of young men and marriageable girls, adds greatly to their esthetic delicacy.

In the fulfilment of their esthetic sense and of appreciation of beauties of nature the tribal peoples often pluck up beautiful flowers to decorate their ear lobes and hair bun.

Tattooing is an art of adorning the actual skin and is widely practised by the aborigines of India. In Assam, however, many of the tribal groups do not tattoo. Among the Aos, by the tattoo marks the linguistic sub-groups can be differentiated. The Konyak warriors tattoo their faces while the others do the same on the chest. Among the Mikirs, the men do not usually tattoo any part of the body, but the females, when they attain puberty, usually tattoo a perpendicular line being drawn from the parting of the hair down the forehead and nose. The presence of tattooed circles on forearm and breast speak of the mementoes of love affairs in happy bachelor days of the Lushais.

III

Some of the tribesmen of Assam reproduce their artistic ideas and esthetic senses in their wood carvings and designs of various nature to be observed in their handicrafts. The principal aim of these carvings is to represent certain objects of nature such as animal-life and plant-life on the artifacts produced by them. These motives have magico-religious purposes to serve. The horn and head of mithan, for example, represent the smart and forceful qualities of that animal, the horn-bill tells the story of the origin of the clan of that name. The carving of an eagle on a drinking cup of the Nagas represents the sudden sweep of the head-hunters on the enemy's camp.

A smoking pipe of the Ao Nagas is prepared out of a single piece of wood where the head of the pipe is represented by a human figure with sharp nose and refined features. On the body of the pipe two human figurines representing a couple are skilfully carved out to embellish and also to convey the idea of procreation.

The *Jambili Athon* or the bag-stand of the Mikirs not only reveals their artistic sense but also their skilfulness in representing the totemic animals. It is used only on the occasion of the *Chomankan* rite of the dead. It has its utilitarian aim in hanging the bag of the performers before they actively join in dancing. This bag-stand cannot be used on any other occasion since they believe that its exposure on any other occasion will bring in its tail a death to the family in the courtyard of which it is planted. The skilfulness of the artist can easily be observed in the animal forms as well as in the decorative geometrical proportions. The main body of the post is tastefully decorated by carving as well as by ornamentation of cowrie shells and coloured beads.

The *Kima* post or funerary post of the Garos is carved out by an expert wood-carver who specialises in this art. Out of a single piece of wood he carves out a human figure representing the dead person on whose death it is erected. The wood-carver tries to attain as much perfection in carving out the physical features as possible. Besides, he finishes the human figure by painting the eye-brows with an indigenous dye as well as by incurving a black bead as the eye-ball. It may be noted, however, that the *Kima* posts represent only the head and the neck. The Garos believe that the soul of the deceased will be able to recognize the family and *mahari* of its origin by observing the *Kima* which is dressed and ornamented as in the life time and which is planted just in front of the house.

Among the Nagas the effigy of a powerful head-hunter carved in a single piece of wood nearly faithfully represents the physical features as well as the ornaments and decorations worn by the late warrior. The enemy's head hung on the neck, human hair worn in the ear lobes as well as on the helix, clearly narrate the story of his head-hunting expeditions by virtue of which he carved out an eminent position of status and leadership within his community. The son of such a powerful warrior by keeping the late father's effigy near his hearth proclaims the power and prestige of his late father and at the same time he derives pleasure of imitating his father in respect of the virtues which qualified his father to attain such a height of valour and glory. As a devoted son he attempts to inherit not only his father's mundane wealth but also to succeed to that eminent office of headmanship of a village by imbibing those qualities which his father possessed during life time. The halo of romance surrounding his father is supposed to pass on to his befitting son who proudly preserves the effigy of his father to proclaim the eminence of his family.

The return of a victorious party of warriors is marked by jubilant festivities and religious ceremonies in which drinking plays a prominent part. Here too, it is the privilege of the successful head-hunters to drink rice beer (*chu*) from a very beautifully decorated cup of bamboo with handle. The skin of the bamboo above a node is carved out with knives to prepare designs of mithan horn and geometric figures. A black dye of indigenous origin is applied in those carvings interspersed with black dots to produce a magnificient design against the cream coloured background.

The Garo wooden shield (*spi*) is now-a-days used as a ceremonial object for dancing purposes. It is no longer a war shield but in it are found the artistic representations of the Garo warriors with a shield in one hand and a sword on the other. A dancing partner beating a drum accompanied by a female dancer completes the picture at one end of the shield. The other end is curved with geometric lines. The border regions are also curved with beautiful designs resembling flowers and trees. The inner portion of the outer surface also is decorated with inset geometric lines. The inner surface represents curved figures of two fishes of fairly big size. Floral curved designs interspersed by decorated straight lines cover the larger part of this surface.

IV

Tribal Art in Assam seems to be developing a tendency to disappear more and more as it is coming in closer contact with the more advanced people, who, more particularly the Plains Assamese, have consciously or unconsciously accepted and absorbed some of the tribal arts, into their own. In recent times the appreciation of tribal art, not only in Assam or throughout India, but also all over the world, has become a craze with a class of people. This sudden wave of appreciation should be a source of encouragement to the betterment of tribal art and be an incentive to its progress.

Some changes in the artistic manifestations of the esthetic tendencies are bound to occur ; but this overt change should not cause apprehension in the minds of those who enthusiastically advocate preservation of anything tribal in origin, in as much as culture itself is dynamic by nature and art is the expression of some aspects of culture.

Isolation, as feverishly advocated by some lovers of tribal art, can seldom succeed in preserving its pristine purity. Would it not be rather inhuman on the part of the advanced people to permit such isolation which may doubtfully preserve the art ? A living culture has its own vitality which grows from within and at the same time it assimilates from its environment, natural and artificial. Our zeal, if not cautiously expressed in words or deeds, may cause more harm than good by closing all the ventilations and windows for free and natural air. Our fear for contamination and suspicion for absolute absorption may not only stunt the growth of the tender aboriginal cultures which require careful nursing and proper nourishment—but is likely to block accleretation of the cultural growth and development of which artistic expression is one of the facets. The isolation in addition, will prevent assimilation of groups of people, causing hindrance to national prosperity as a whole.*

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The Administrative System of the Ahoms

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The Ahoms are members of the Shan branch of the great Tai or Thai family of the human race. Sukapha who first conquered Assam in 1228 A.D. was a prince of the Shan state of Maulung in Upper Burma. The Ahoms ruled in Assam for six hundred years, till the year 1826, when the government of the kingdom passed into the hands of the East India Company by the Treaty of Yandabo. The territory first occupied by them was a small one, mainly confined to a portion of Eastern Assam, but it gradually extended westward; and after the termination of the Mogul wars in 1682, it extended up to the river Manaha, opposite Goalpara. This limit remained unaltered till the end of Ahom rule in 1826. The kingdom was always known as Assam irrespective of the fluctuations in its dimensions.

The question has always been asked as to how it was possible for the Ahoms to continue in power for such a length of time. Their numerical strength was very much inferior to that of the conquered races, who belonged to different faiths and racial affinities, and spoke different languages. Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of India, admitted that the fact that the government of the Ahoms continued for six centuries indicated that there must be something intrinsically good in the constitution.

Two basic factors stand out prominently to explain the efficiency of the Ahom system of administration. They described Assam as a casket of gold—*sonar saphura*—and they would never allow any outsider to have a footing in the land and any misdeed to tarnish its fair name. Temporary discomfitures never dismayed them. "If the sun is once eclipsed, does it not make its appearance again," was their motto in all measures of recuperation and rehabilitation. The kings loved their country and their subjects with emotional fervour. The ninety-seven-year old monarch Swargadeo Pratap Singha, sailed along the Dikhow river in a barge, baring his body, and bidding farewell to his subjects lined on both banks of the river. The assemblage in their turn offered to sacrifice one hundred stalwarts from amongst them if by doing so they could renovate the monarch's failing health. His grandson Swargadeo Jayadhwaj Singha wept bitter tears when he peeped through the gate of the capital city of Gargaon devastated by the Mogul invaders under Nawab Mir Jumla.

The success of the Ahoms was due principally to their ability to take full advantage of the surroundings and circumstances in which they were placed, and adjust their administrative policy in accordance with the resources and opportunities of that set-up.

The Ahom kings were known by the appellation of Swargadeos, as their earliest ancestors were regarded as the sons of the great god Indra who came down from heaven in a golden ladder to redeem mankind from misery and injustice. There was thus a halo of divinity round the monarchs, and their person was always sacrosanct and inviolable. All honours and prerogatives emanted from the Swargadeos, and all superior appointments were made by them. Important cases, specially the records of trials involving capital offences, had to be submitted to them for final orders, and they alone could sanction the infliction of capital punishment which required the shedding of blood. Elaborate instructions were given to the monarchs at the time of their enthronement which combined the injunctions of the Ahom priestly code and of the Hindu Dandanitis.

The king's highest advisers were known under the collective name of Patra-mantri, consisting of the Buragohain, Bargohain, Barpatra Gohain, Barbarua and Barphukan. Supreme decisions like the selection of monarchs and their deposal were taken by the three Gohains. The kings had to abide by the decisions of the three Gohains, and their refusal to do so always led to complications. A tactful sovereign could bring the Gohains to his way of thinking by persuasion, and he was at liberty to exercise his prerogative of acting independently of the advice of the Gohains. He had then to fall back upon the support of the executive officers, the Phukans and the Baruas. The government was thus a combination of limited monarchy and oligarchy, and the balance of power was steadily and carefully maintained between the sovereigns and the nobles. Troubles came when there was a collision of interests, and the monarchs and the nobles exercised their prerogatives in excess of their limitations. The Gohains took the field when necessity arose ; and all important matters, like the construction of fortifications, survey and settlement operations, were carried out under their direct supervision.

The Barbarua was the chief executive officer and the head of the judiciary, and as such he wielded great power. The records of all important trials came up to him for adjudication. He made arrangements for the king's coronation, and for his itinerary. The Barphukan lived at Gauhati as viceroy, and he went up to the capital frequently for personal consultations with the king and the ministers. His office was a very important one as he had to face the first brunt of an attack from the west. The Rajkhowas were governors of specified areas, where they administered justice and supervised the working of the paiks. In times of war they marched to the battle at the head of the contingent composed of the levies in their jurisdiction. The harmony of the administration sprang from the symmetrical working of the different wings, and difficulties arose when one wing proved refractory or disloyal. The possibility of delinquency was reduced to a minimum as the movements and activities of every paik and his immediate superiors were supervised by a gradation of officers.

The Ahoms harnessed every adult male in the service of the state, as a labourer or a soldier. He was registered as a paik, and four paiks constituted a squad known as a *got*. The paiks had to serve the government in turn, and the normal work of an absentee paik in his village had to be performed by his home-keeping comrades. Usually, one man out of the four had to be absent from home, sometimes two, and when emergencies came three men in a squad were employed in state service. Thus, every male subject of the kingdom acquired some elementary knowledge of the requirements of the state, and when he returned home after his allotted period of service he became a source of political information in his village. Some amount of civic obligation was fostered by the system of rendering assistance to the normal work of the comrades absent from their village on state service. The levy of the first men in a squad was called a *mul,* of the second a *dowal,* and of the third a *tewal*. The *mul* levy being on active service, the *dowal* and the *tewal* remained ready in their villages for being called upon to report for duty at any time. An elaborate machinery was set up for maintaining a record of the paiks, and for filling up vacancies as occasions arose. Twenty paiks were placed under an officer known as a Bora, a hundred under a Saikia, and a thousand under a Hazarika. The head of the unit under whom the paiks served was called a Barua ; and sometimes a Phukan if the unit was of greater importance. Each unit was called a *Khel ;* and the components of a Khel considered themselves to be members of one political fraternity.

The paik system of the Ahoms obviated the necessity of maintaining a huge army at the headquarters, as the non-serving paiks constituted a standing militia which could be mobilised at a short notice by the Kheldar working through his subordinate officers. Some preliminary knowledge of his duties, civil or military, being implanted in each paik by his previous service in the state, he had to undergo a brushing off or a refresher course at his allotted headquarter or the metropolis, combined with intensive training specially needed for the occasion. Only a signal had to be passed on to the Kheldar, and the machinery of mobilisiation moved on apace placing at the disposal of the government the requisite number of men as the occasion demanded. Some subjects enjoyed immunity from personal service if their disassociation from their villages caused dislocation to the normal life of the people. Government had not to resort to formal conscription as the services of the whole body of adult effectives could be commanded in times of emergency.

The paiks were grouped on an occupational and territorial basis. They were attached to the several guilds or Khels, namely, bow makers, bow shooters, musketeers, gunpowder manufacturers, boat builders, boat repairers, rice suppliers, honey suppliers, gold-washers, supervisors of temples, etc. The paiks of a specified area were sometimes placed under a Rajkhowa, who wielded in his jurisdiction all the powers of a Barua or a Phukan.

Assam extending up to the foot of the hills on the north, east and south, is intersected by numerous streams which, after the monsoon rains and floods, leave a deposit of silt which makes the land extremely fertile capable of yielding a variety of crops. The rulers aimed that the vast tracts of arable lands should be cultivated, and their produce feed and maintain not only the population, but also the officials and princes, and provide sufficient reserves for emergencies like wars and famines. No one not even the highest functionary, was paid his salary in cash. A contingent of paiks or servitors was placed at his disposal who ploughed the fields and produced the needed crops. In emergencies rigorous measures were instituted so that villagers could take to cultivation without any demur in order to produce the required quota of foodgrains. An officer when out of employment had to depend upon his household retainers, bondsmen and family members for the cultivation of his fields. An ordinary paik who served the state as a labourer or a soldier was given free of rent about three acres of land as his remuneration. A newly enthroned monarch had to perform the ceremony of sacrificial ploughing at the time of his coronation ; and nobles and princes did not think it beneath their dignity if they ploughed in their fields. Several princes expressed the view that they were much happier when they earned their livelihood as ploughmen than when they were entangled in political controversies in their role as monarchs.

The Ahom attitude towards the tribesmen of the frontier was one of amity, accompanied by the application of force when the situation demanded. The Ahoms recognised that the chasing of tribal miscreants to the recesses of their hills was a fruitless endeavour : it was like "an elephant entering into a rat-hole." Regular blackmail was paid to the hillmen to prevent them from foraging excursions into the plains. The blackmail consisted of articles of necessity to the tribes like clothes, metals and salt. Intercourse with the Nagas was conducted under the supervision of a number of local officers called Naga Katakis, who controlled the entrances and exits of the tribesmen. The conciliatory policy of the Ahoms made the hillmen their eternal friends, and all major operations like wars elicited the ungrudging support of Assam's stalwart and martial neighbours.

The strategic frontiers of Assam were placed in charge of high-ranking wardens, recruited from the families of the Buragohain and the Bargohain. The Sadiya-khowa Gohain held the passes near Sadiya ; the Solal Gohain lived at his headquarter in Biswanath or Kaliabar ; the Jagialia Gohain conducted the relations with the Jayantias ; the Marangi-khowa Gohain with the Kacharis ; and the Kajalimukhia Gohain lived on the mouth of Kapili. The Raja of Darrang was in charge of the relations with the Bhutanese ; and the Duaria Barua, stationed at Hadirachoki, with Bengal. The Barphukan or the Ahom viceroy at Gauhati was in over-all charge of all frontier relations in the west of Assam. He also dealt with the relations with the Muslim powers of Bengal, and later on with the affairs of the East India Company. Of course, all matters of importance were communicated to the king and his ministers, and the Barphukan acted in accordance with the instructions received from the capital.

The Ahom attitude towards the entrance of outsiders from the west of their kingdom was one of extreme caution. Hordes of invaders, both Afghan and Mogul, had entered Assam through Bengal, and they had to be resisted with all might. Westerners were therefore looked upon with suspicion, as they had a separate political loyalty, and the exact purpose of their visit could not be ascertained with certainty. But Assam wanted men to work in several avocations—accountants, artizans, architects, and mechanics, and their introduction was freely encouraged, provided they settled in Assam for good, and did not return to their homeland. All possible facilities were given to them for their permanent residence in Assam by granting them lands and servitors. These new-comers were gradually assimilated with the original stock, and their children did not suffer any disability for their extra-territorial descent.

Punishments were inflicted in a very rigorous manner. A traitor was punished by execution which was in many cases extended to the leading members of his family. The common punishments were—extraction of eyes and knee-cups, slicing off of noses and ears, hammering by clubs, throwing off into water, hanging by a hook, pressure between two wooden cylinders, and hoeing from head to feet. The severest form of execution consisted in cutting off slices from the body before final decapitation. Crimes were perceptibly reduced as the people lived in perpetual dread of the inevitable consequences of the violation of law and order.

The first batch of Ahom conquerors numbered only a few thousand stalwarts. But the original fold was gradually reinforced by the introduction of members of the subject races. The new entrants enjoyed all the privileges of the original Ahoms when they proved worthy of them. The Ahoms thus became in course of time a cosmopolitan entity. The steel frame of the administration was however confined to the descendants of the companions of Sukapha. The elevation of new entrants to high offices no doubt caused at first some chagrin to the older Ahoms, though resistance melted down as the new-comers distinguished themselves by their loyalty, gallantry and success in the diplomatic field. The Ahoms were free from caste prejudices, and what appealed to them was a finely built body, some amount of dash, and a sense of probity and quick decision.

A very large majority of the people of Assam were Hindus, and the Ahom religious cult was a different feature altogether. The rulers gradually adopted Hindu customs and manners, although a large number still adhered to their original Shan faith. The rulers adopted a definite principle of non-interference and tolerance. Not being aware of the full implications of the Hindu faith, they looked askance at any innovation in that faith fearing that such an innovation might be followed by a commotion in the land. Hindu institutions received liberal patronage from the Ahom sovereigns. They erected Hindu temples, endowed lands and servitors for perpetual worship in those temples, and also in the Vaisnava monasteries. They also continued to respect Ahom customs ; and Ahom priests were held in high reverence till the end. Muslim priests and preachers were given due honour, and lands were bestowed on them to enable them to carry on their work in ease and comfort. This religious neutrality, and the encouragement of the faiths prevailing in the land accounted for the long popularity of Ahom rule in Assam. Trouble came when an Ahom queen in her zeal for Saktaism offended a very powerful Vaisnava pontiff who had a numerous and united body of disciples.

The Ahoms brought with them their manuscripts dealing both with religious and secular matters. But the knowledge of their literary treasures became gradually confined to the members of the priestly order, the Deodhais, Bailungs and Mohans, and the higher aristocracy. The Ahom language was used on ceremonial occasions like worship of the deities and coronations. It was also used in some copperplates and coins. Knowledge of the language had to be maintained because the Ahoms continued their intercourse with the Shans of Upper Burma till the end of their rule. From the stray glimpses that we have got of Ahom literature it appears to be rich in astrological treatises and chronicles. Lexicons from Assamese to Ahom and vice-versa were also compiled ; and the Ramayana was translated into the Ahom language.

But the use of Ahom as a spoken language gradually became obsolete, and the rulers found it convenient to use the medium of the local inhabitants in their daily intercourse. The princes and nobles became patrons of Assamese writers ; and some monarchs even wrote songs in Assamese, and one of them wrote a drama. Hindu scholars and poets flourished in the Ahom court, and produced works which have enriched the literature of the Assamese. The adoption of the Assamese language as the medium of social intercourse, made the people feel that the rulers were one with them. The old inhabitants never felt for a moment that they were being governed by outsiders. In fact, it was freely admitted by the newly conquered inhabitants that though the Ahoms came from a far-country they liked to meet them frequently on account of their affability and straightforwardness.

One of the greatest contributions made by the Ahoms to the culture of the Assamese people was the custom of compiling chronicles, which were first written in the Ahom language, and subsequently in both Assamese and Ahom. All political transactions were recorded in the chronicles or Buranjis, and they served as precedents. Bad deeds and good ones were scrolled with impartiality, and the authors enjoyed immunity from vengeance or praise as the chronicles were preserved with the utmost secrecy, and the divulsion of the facts recorded there was considered as an insult shown to one's mother. The scope of the historical literature of Assam was not confined to the four corners of the kingdom : it extended to the neighbouring races and tribes, and the states of India with which Assam had some sort of political relations. There were monographs dealing with the Muslim rulers of Delhi, as their knowledge was an essential preliminary to the successful implementation of war measures.

Besides the Buranjis, books containing useful information were compiled under official auspices. Assam is the land of elephants, which were used on ceremonial occasions, and also for commercial purposes, and in wars. There are numerous treatises on elephants of varying length and treatment. There were treatises also on horses, hawks, fortifications, building construction, and the order of precedence of the nobles and officers. The Ahoms reduced all useful knowledge into writing, so that each department of the state could have a staff manual for ready reference.

The Ahoms as a sovereign power have ceased to exist since the year 1826, but visible traces of their rule still exist in different forms. The common Assamese titles, Phukan, Barua, Rajkhowa, Hazarika, Saikia, Bora, Kataki, Kakati, Bujar-Barua, Patwari, Chowdhury, are still used by the descendants of the original holders of the respective offices. Land-grants made by the Ahom monarchs are still held by the successor individuals and institutions. Worship is still going on in the temples erected by the Ahoms. The tanks excavated under their orders are still used as water reservoirs and fisheries, and their highways traversed by thousands of travellers till this day. The Khel system so much in vogue during the Ahom days still influences the social order of the Assamese people. All this shows how intimately and extensively the impact of the rule of the Ahoms had permeated the country and the masses.

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Tribal Contributions in Assam's Set-up

By

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THE modern State of Assam, situated as it is in the strategic North-East Frontier of the Republic of India with its boundaries marching along those of Burma and China in an important sector and of Pakistan in another, evolved out of the British Province of Assam as formed and shaped by the British, during the nineteenth century, according to the needs of defence of the frontiers of their empire in India and requirements of internal administration of the territories they acquired in this area.

The British succeeded the Ahoms as the paramount power in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the decade between 1816 and 1826 the independent sovereignty of the Ahoms in Assam, lasting for nearly six hundred years but already weakened by internal dissensions and civil war, had received mortal blows from repeated Burmese invasions that took place during that period, and in 1826, as a result of the Treaty of Yandabu concluded between the British and the Burmese Governments on the termination of the first Anglo-Burmese War, Assam had passed into the hands of the British. After its annexation Assam was constituted a division of Bengal and placed in the administrative charge of a Commissioner who was also the Agent to the Governor General of India on the North-East Frontier. As such this officer controlled, subject to the directions of the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, the political relations of the British Government with the neighbouring States and Border Tribes. In 1874 after nearly half a century of tutelage under Bengal, Assam emerged as a separate and distinct unit of the British Empire in India under a Chief Commissioner.

Political background

The British Province of Assam as constituted in the year 1874 was based mainly on considerations of administrative convenience and requirements of imperial policy. Nevertheless the experiment of administering this newly acquired territory as a Division of Bengal from 1826 to 1874 convinced the British administrators of the separate linquistic and cultural entity of this area and of its independent historical background. For in the last phase of this period had ensued the Bengali-Assamese controversy resulting in the restoration, by order of the Lieut. Governor of Bengal, of Assamese to its rightful place in the Courts and Schools of Assam from where it had been excluded under a misconception by the introduction of Bengali in 1837. Geographical contiguity as also historical association and economic factors determined the policy of ultimate incorporation of the Hill Districts (the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills, the North Cachar and Mikir Hills, the Garo Hills and the Lushai Hills) into Assam as and when they were formed and of the exercise of political jurisdiction over tribal areas in the Northern and North Eastern Frontier of Assam. For most of the Hill tribes in these areas were in varying degrees of subjection to or dependence on the old Assam Rulers and carried on an active barter with the people of the plains in the Brahmaputra Valley. The districts of Goalpara and Cachar were incorporated with Assam on similar grounds of geographical contiguity and natural topographical alignments, but racial and cultural affinity of the people of these districts with those of other Assam Valley districts further showed that these districts were not arbitrarily joined to Assam for mere administration convenience. Only Sylhet might be said to have been tagged to Assam more or less arbitrarily to suit the convenience of British administrators and with the transference of the major part of Sylhet to Pakistan as a result of the partition of India in 1947, on the eve of independence, the province of Assam became more compact and homogeneous than it was before.

It is not claimed that Assam as at present constituted is absolutely a homogeneous State in respect of language and culture. There are diversities in the composition of her population, in language and culture. But behind the apparent diversities there are strong undeniable affinities, racial, linguistic and cultural, which are clearly marked in the historical process of her evolution leading eventually to her emergence first as a distinct province of the British empire in India and then as a constituent State of the Union of India.

Fusion of races and cultures in Assam

Assam is one of the foremost regions in India where there have taken place a fusion of races and a synthesis of cultures leading to the 'evolution and characterisation' of a composite people and a composite culture which, though having regional peculiarities of its own and a stamp of the indigenous elements going to make up that culture, is nevertheless an integral part of the common Indian heritage.

Although in its restricted sense the Assamese are taken to comprise only those people in Assam whose mother tongue is Assamese, rightly understood the appellation embraces within its fold various ethnic groups inhabiting the plains of Assam and the hills on its fringes. Many of these groups belonging to different families (Tibeto-Burman and Chinese-Siamese) of the Indo-Mongoloid race that penetrated into the Brahmaputra Valley and the adjoining hills, and even beyond, in repeated streams from pre-historic times, have in course of time abandoned their original speeches or dialects and acquired the Aryan Assamese language which the Aryan settlers in the Valley developed out of Sanskritic bases ; such were the Chutiyas, Ahoms, Koches and other tribes as noticed by Sir Edward Gait in his History of Assam, by Dr. S. K. Chatterji in his 'Kirāta-jana-kṛti' and other scholars.

Many like the Bodos, Kacharis, Miris, Mikirs, etc., still use their own dialects among themselves but have long adopted the Assamese language for communication with other sections of the population, for education and other purposes.

Political instability and the isolated and semi-independent nature of their habitations prevented the spread of the Assamese language among the various tribes living in the interior hills on the borders of Assam and they still retain their own dialects as mediums of speech, but mostly in a primitive stage of development. Manipuri and Khasi alone of the tribal speeches in the Assam Zone developed to any extent deserving notice. But it may be remembered that Assamese was, and even today is, the language of communication in the frontiers of Assam especially in the North and the North-East. In the old District Gazetteer for Goalpara, 1905, it was observed, "In the other districts of Assam Valley the Tibeto-Burman tribes are generally bilingual, and know enough of Assamese to enable them to carry on a conversation with their Hindu neighbours. This is not the case in Goalpara, and in the Eastern Duars (i.e., passes leading to Bhutan) intercourse with the villagers is much restricted for any one who does not happen to have studied Mech (a Bodo dialect)". In regard to the Nagas Dr. S. K. Chatterji has rightly observed, "The Aryan Assamese (and occasionally Hindi) forms a common Lingua Franca among the various Naga tribes." The Naga tribes are used to speak dialects each of which is intelligible only to the members of the tribe speaking it. It is clear that Assamese or at least a jargon, half Assamese and half tribal dialect, has been the medium of communication between the people of the hills and the people of the plains in Assam. Assamese has rightly therefore been recognised in the Constitution of India as the Regional language of Assam and it is undoubtedly one of the most potent unifying forces.

It appears that the British administrators of Assam thought of harnessing this force in the political unification of the North-East Frontier regions with the plains of Assam, but the later developments of their policy beginning with the Inner Line Regulation, 1873, controlling the intercourse of the plains people with those of the hills were not conducive to the desired integration. In a letter (No. 12 of 15th February, 1844) addressed to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department, after giving a description of the tribes coming under British jurisdiction in the 'forties of the last century the Agent to the Governor General of India on the North-East Frontier, Capt. Jenkins, wrote, "In conclusion I beg permission to be allowed to establish a school at Saikwah for which I was petitioned. The institution will I think be particulary useful amongst so rude a population by bringing the youths of all the tribes together and bearing them up in the use of one common language, the first step to amalgamate them with the mass of our Assamese subjects." Jenkins made a similar proposal for establishment of a school at Dimapur for the education of the Naga children in the language of the plains of Assam and refers in his correspondences to the Government of India of Assamese being the medium of communication in the Naga Hills. If the principle indicated in these proposals had been followed in earnest the language problem in the North-East Frontier would have been much easier today.

The linguistic picture

To complete the linguistic picture of Assam the following observations as derived from Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India and Dr. S. K. Chatterji's monograph mentioned above may be added. The Sino-Tibetan languages have two groups, (i) the Tibeto-Burman and (ii) the Siamese-Chinese. The former includes the North Assam group of dialects—Aka or Hrusso, Miri-Abor, Dufla and Mishmi ; the Assam-Burmese group—these include the Bodo speeches—Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Kachari, etc., the Naga dialects—Ao, Angami, Sema, Tungkhul, Songtem, etc. and the Kuki-Chin speeches of Manipur and Lushai Hills, the most important of which is Meitheri or Manipuri. The latter group includes Ahom and Khampti the former of which is now extinct. An important Hill tribe of Assam, the Khasis, although racially of Indo-Mongoloid extraction, speaks an Austric (Monkhmer) language. "The various groups of Tibeto-Burman tribes in Assam are united by virtue of some common points of linguistic and cultural resemblances among them. The Bodo tribes are linguistically connected with the Nagas, but whereas the Nagas have always remained isolated, the Bodos spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley including the Garo Hills... and from the Nowgong district in the Assam valley their area of occupation extended to the Cachar district... The Bodos thus form one of the main bases of the population in Assam." A second unifying factor is thus found in the "linguistic and cultural" resemblances among the Tibeto-Burman groups of the Assamese people whether they speak the Aryan-Assamese language or not.

Bengali is spoken by the large body of immigrant settlers in the Cachar District and by a section of immigrants and refugees settled mostly in recent times among the Assamese population in the other valley districts of Assam. But Bengali has never been a unifying force in Assam in the sense the regional language Assamese has been. It is however to be noted that though linguistically different from the bulk of the Assamese population, the Bengalis have many features in common with the Assamese racially as also culturally, they being descended more or less from the same racial stocks, Austric, Dravindian, Aryan and Mongolian from which the Assamese people have sprung and being heirs to the same Indian culture and religious beliefs which infuse the cultural and religious life of Assam. The Muhammadan element in the population of Assam was due partly to the settlement of stragglers of Muslim armies that invaded Assam on several occasions in medieval times and partly to immigration in later times mainly from Bengal districts. Their assimilation into the Assamese fold in the Assam valley has been comparatively easy.

The Racial Pattern

It will appear from the picture drawn above that the Assamese do not represent a particular race in the ethnological sense. They are a composite people—the product of a historical process of assimilation and integration of diverse racial elements which has been at work since time immemorial. Assam has been the meeting place of different races of mankind—Austric, Mongolian, Dravidian and Aryan that entered into the lovely valley of the Brahmaputra from time to time from the east and from the west and intermingled in varying proportions, through the operation of historical forces in course of ages, to form the distinctive Assamese people with their distinctive religious beliefs, cultural habits, language, literature and traditions. It is the Mongolian element, however, that predominates in the racial type of Assam. "Assam is the tract where the Indo-Mongoloid elements are present in their largest number in India. In Assam they dominated the scene, politically mostly, and to some extent culturally also (althrough in matters of culture including religion, the composite Hindu culture of the Gangetic Valley has always had the outward victory). Excepting the members of a few of the higher castes from the west (and these are as much mixed Austric-Dravidian-Aryan, as any) the masses of the people are Indo-Mongoloid with some Austric and Dravidian substratum. The Indo-Mongoloid inheritance therefore belongs in a special manner to the people of Assam irrespective of the Aryan language they may speak" The history and culture of Assam are thus inter-woven with the destiny of different streams of people that co-mingled through war and conquest and voluntary association to form the composite community we know as the Assamese community today. As already noticed, it is however the Aryan stream that gave form to the language which is the Assamese language and set the pattern of Assamese culture.

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But the Indo-Mongoloid contributions to the Assamese language and even to Assamese culture cannot be ignored. "In the development of the Aryan Assamese language the influence of Bodo and Naga as well as the late Ahom languages is noticed. The Austric Khasi speech of the Indo-Mongoloid Khasis and Syntengs (Jaintias) has similarly influenced the contiguous Aryan. Dr. Banikanta Kakati in his valuable treatise, "Assamese—its Formation and Development' has given lists of words and toponyms of Khasi origin as well as Bodo and Ahom origin in Assamese. Similarly in the region of culture and religion though Brahmanical Hinduism slowly won over the non-Aryan groups of people to its fold various tribal beliefs and institutions were consecrated and embodied in the Hindu super-structure. The Mongoloid contribution is not so extensive and deep, but nevertheless it is there in the history, life and culture of Nepal, North and East Bengal and Assam."

The cultural synthesis

The popular notion about Assamese culture seems to be that it is co-terminous with the Assamese language and is limited to the Assamese speaking people in the plains of Assam. This is a narrow view. Assamese culture like the Assamese people has a wider context than the Assamese language. While language is an ingredient of culture it is not the sole determinant of culture. All who speak the English language cannot be said to have imbibed the English culture. Even in its restricted sense Assamese culture like the Assamese people is a composite product embodying in it not only Aryan, but also Dravidian, Mongolian and other tribal culture traits. In the realm of social habits, and customs, religious beliefs, rites and ceremonies, in the realm of folk-lore, dance and music, painting and architecture and in the realm of dress and apparel, the arts of spinning and weaving and other cottage industries for making the ordinary implements and wherewithals of daily use in the life of the people, one would find diffusion of culture-traits from one ethnic group to another in a give area. This is so in Assam and the process only received a check when the British adopted a policy of isolating the tribal people and keeping them in a backward groove.

There are copious instances of non-Aryan tribes coming within the pale of Hinduism under the influence of the Brahmins and tribal beliefs being incorporated into the Brahmanical faith. The Goddess "Kechāi-Khāiti" or "the Eater of Raw Flesh" of the Chutiyas, a mixed Bodo tribe whose religion was a 'primitive kind of animism' was identified with Kali and the conversion of the Chutiyas into the Tantric form of Hinduism was rendered easy. Similarly when the Koches and the Ahoms were Hinduised they were given Puranic geneologies and some of their religious beliefs were assimilated into the Hindu faith. The Bihu, an Assamese national festival of dance and music must have been a gift of the tribal peoples mostly to the composite Assamese culture. There are elements in the indigenous tribal festivals of this kind which are reminiscent of a fusion of cultures in the remote past, a first-fruit of which seems to have been the Bihu festival itself. The best Bihu dance is performed by the Miris ; one would see the likeness of the Bihu dance and music among the Abors. One would see the likeness of the indigenous Assamese female dress and mode of hair-dressing among the Galong Abors ; one would hear the echo of familiar Assamese tunes in a distant hill, the home of a tribe.

In the history of Assam as also of Koch Behar, Cachar, Jaintia and Tripura which formed parts of the old Kāmarūpa kingdom—it was mainly the Hinduised non-Aryan (Indo-Mongoloids) who took part in it, Brahmins and other purer Hindus hailing mostly from the West being numerically too small to take effective part in local affairs and political upheavals. The latter only acted as a powerful leaven in gradually bringing about a uniformity of religion and culture through Puranic Hinduism. This transformation was clearly evident in the plains, but there was little of it in the hills which therefore remained in the past mostly unaffected by influences from outside. The history of Assam from the middle of the thirteenth to the end of the seventeenth century was to some extent the history of a struggle between the original Indo-Mongoloid inhabitants of the country (mostly Bodo such as the Chutiyas, Morans, Borahis, Kacharis and Koches) and the newly arrived Ahoms who belonged to a distant branch of the same Sino-Tibetan stock.

Of the various tribes inhabiting the Brahmaputra Valley, the Ahoms are almost the only people whose ancient records, as pointed out by Sir Herbert Risley, throw light on the origin of a tribe. The Ahoms are a Shan people who entered Assam early in the thirteenth century and within the next three hundred years conquered the eastern half of the old Kamarupa kingdom and possibly gave their name to it. After the fall of the Koch power at the end of the sixteenth century, Koch Behar and the adjoining districts were lost to the Kāmarūpa Kingdom, the kingdom itself disappeared and in its place emerged the more compact and easterly kingdom of Assam where the Ahoms consolidated their rule defeating their rivals in the plains and subjugating or keeping in check by friendly relations or coercion the hill tribes on the borders. It was during this period that the Assamese people who are by no means co-terminous with the Ahoms, but include them in their category evolved in all their strength as a distinct 'nation' or community. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the Ahoms embraced Hinduism, lost their original language and merged along with others such as the Chutiyas, Kacharis and Koches, etc. into a single Aryan Assamese speaking people in Assam. The Ahom king Rudra Singha had conquered Cachar and Jaintia and had thus made himself complete master of both the Brahmaputra Valley and the Hill States to the South. "The apogee of the Indo-Mongoloid Ahom State was achieved by 1715. After this the Ahom power gradually declined, but they continued to rule over Assam right up to the annexation of the territory by the English in 1826."

A homogenous entity in the making

Thus we notice the gradual evolution of a homogeneous entity as against, and out of, the diversity represented by numerous small ethnic groups—the tribal people—since very early times in the history of Assam. The process was intensified during the Ahom rule as the Ahoms besides consolidating their military power also gave cohesion to the social organisation. This process of assimilation and integration of smaller units to form a larger whole received a set-back when a foreign power, the British, came to exercise dominion in Assam with their own imperial policy and ideas of patronage of people whom they wanted to keep under their subjection. The diversities that existed in the life of Assam in the apparently heterogeneous character of the people inhabiting it were not sought to be minimised though it must be admitted that the British masters reorientated and reorganised the whole administrative system giving the people new opportunities of growth in varying degrees as a subject people. The adjoining hills were brought under more definite administrative or political control, but they were kept more or less isolated as compartmental blocks. Ties of affinity with the hills people of the people of the plains, in respect of language, culture, trade and commerce, were hardly emphasised or sought to be developed. But these are there as underlying currents as already described above.

Lying in the North-eastern frontier of India where 'India marches with the great Mongolian region of the earth' Assam has witnessed in course of ages great migrations of people of different races into her hills and valleys. She has been the converging point of races and sub-races that added ever newer threads to the texture of her population. A process of absorption and assimilation of countless small tribes and groups into the generic category of an Assamese people has been at work all through the history of Assam down to the present day. Like hundreds of tributary streams pouring their waters into the mighty Brahmaputra from the North and the South, countless streams of immigration have contributed to the making of the Assamese people and their history and culture. The Ahoms were not the last immigrants from beyond the Patkai, other Shan tribes migrated later into Assam and were absorbed into the general population or were in the process of being so absorbed. Such were some of the Khampti and Singpho tribes. Settlers from the hills came down to the plains and soon assumed the character of the Assamese people. Many Duflas, Miris and Nagas among others thus settled in the plains. Even Bengalis and other Indians who came and settled in Assam before the British came gave up their individuality as such and mixed up with the Assamese population. We have instances of Bengalis accepting service under the Ahoms and becoming Assamese for all purposes. Later immigrants from Bengal and other parts of India are also in the process of regarding themselves as children of the soil.

Inflence of History and Geography

History and geography destined Assam to be the melting pot of races and cultures, but the trends of her natural historical evolution as the home of a compact and homogeneous population were disturbed by conquest and domination by foreign powers. Foreign impact and exploitation narrowed down the channels of spontaneous growth and expansion. The natural intensification of the process of assimilation that had begun with the consolidation of Ahom rule was bound to mature in the fullness of time had not the political condition of Assam so deteriorated in the early decades of the nineteenth century as to make her an easy victim of foreign aggression. It was to the interest of the alien imperial rulers, the British, to accentuate differences instead of reducing them to minimum, to keep apart the different groups of people in the hills and in the plains, instead of binding them together in closer bonds of unity. But the homogeneity of interests, economic and political, as also cultural, which different sections of people inhabiting this region undeniably have, should make it possible for them to forge means of harmonious co-operation making allowances for new conceptions of rights and obligations in the changed order of things in a modern democracy. Unaggressive by nature the people of Assam bear in them the ingredients of a people proud of their heroic past and catholic enough to work for greater solidarity with their compatriots in the field.

One important factor to be borne in mind with reference to Assam is its situation in the North East Frontier of India. It is this frontier which by its strategic importance in relation to foreign States across its borders has deserved the same attention of the Government of India which in British days and before partition the North West Frontier did. The scales have changed and Assam with its adjoining regions has got to be strengthened in internal cohesion so that it may serve as a bulwark of defence against any eventuality of danger. The unity and security of India will very much depend on the unity and security of its component regional units, more so of the frontier zones. The forces of disintegration which unhappily, are not wholly absent in this region, must not be allowed to jeopardise the national security. Voices for disruption based on mere linguistic or cultural grounds need be tempered with counsel for reason and a co-operative frame of mind. Whatever apparent diversities may exist in the life of Assam—and the growing political consciousness of the people have often accentuated these to the detriment of the national interest—it is always possible to foster the common bonds of unity which have existed behind the diversities as shown in the foregoing paragraphs. The present set-up of the State of Assam is not a matter of mere accident. There is a historical justification for it and there can be no stronger justification for severance of any part of it. Assam is typical of the variety in life that India is and the preservation of its integrity is of the first importance to the unity and integrity of India.

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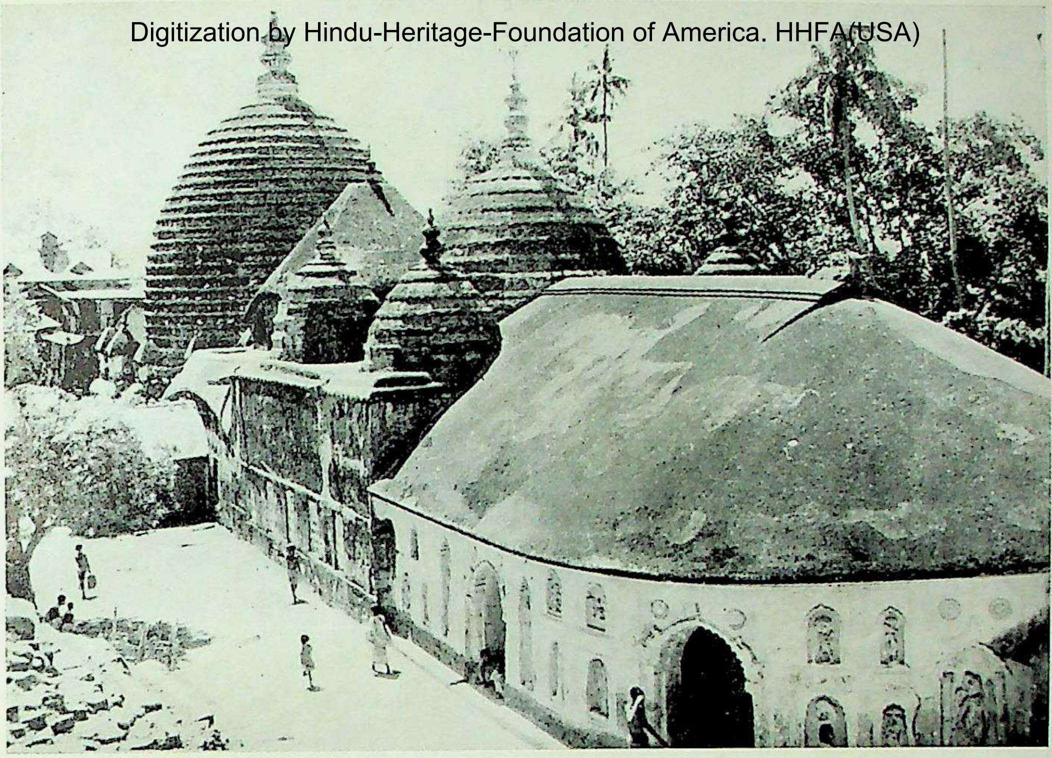

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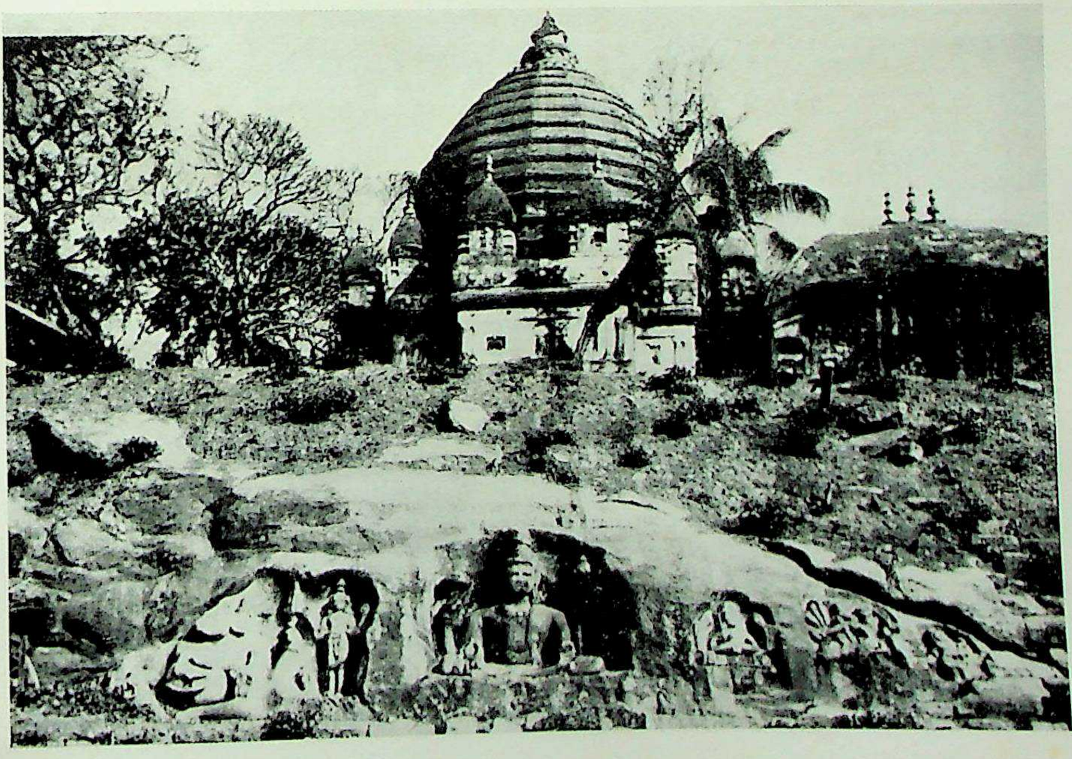

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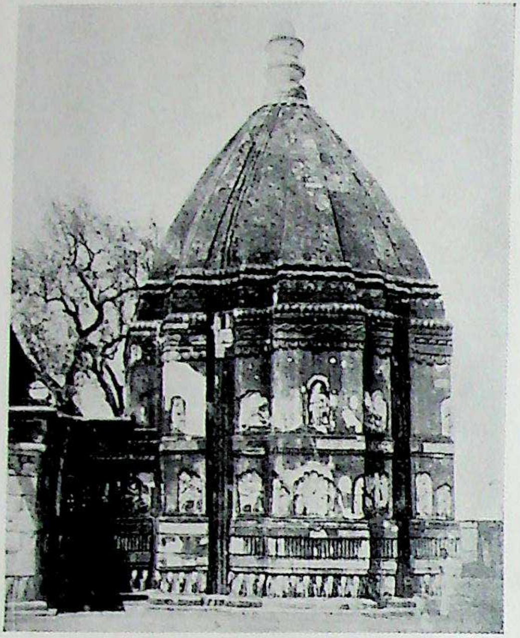

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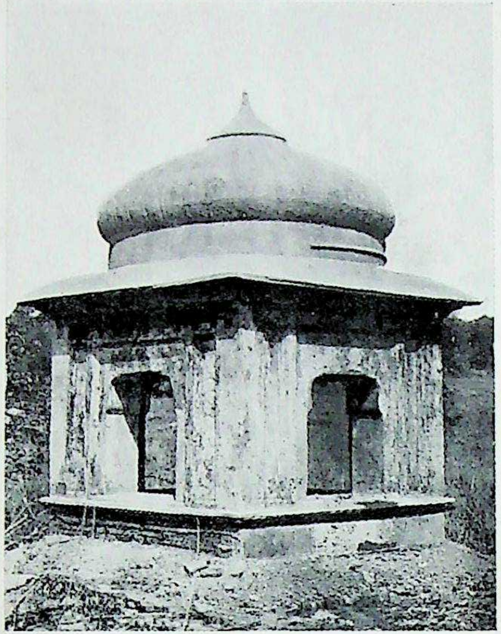

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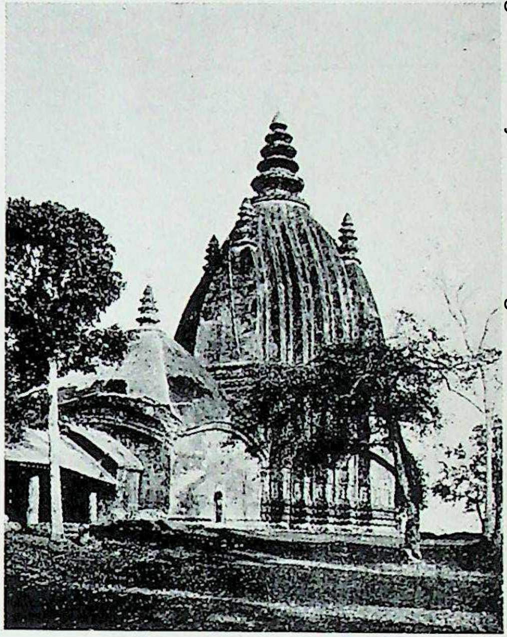

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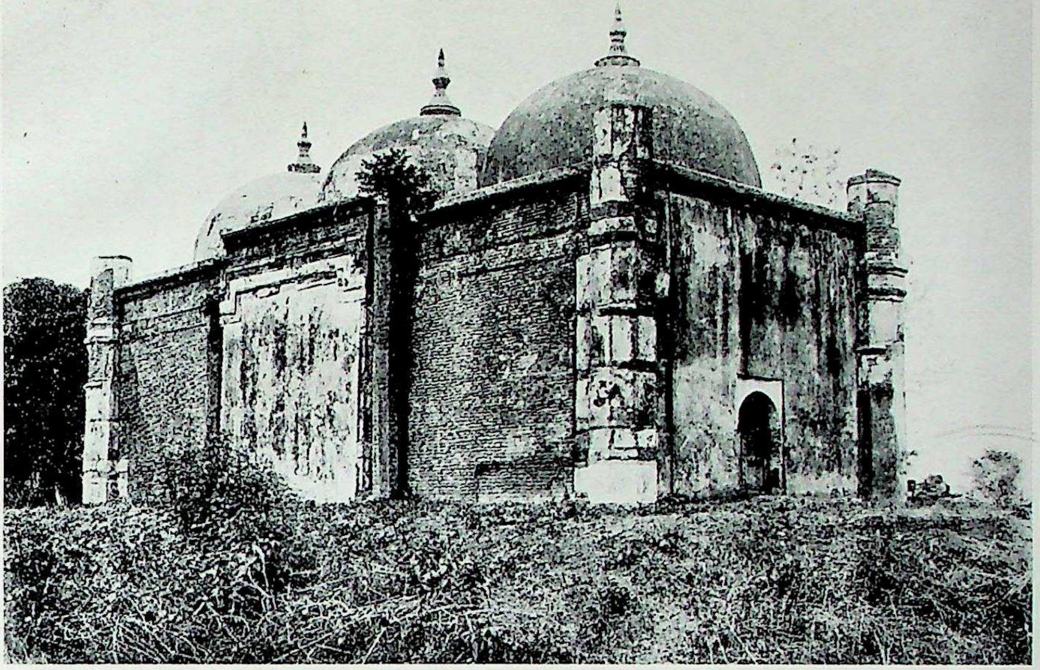

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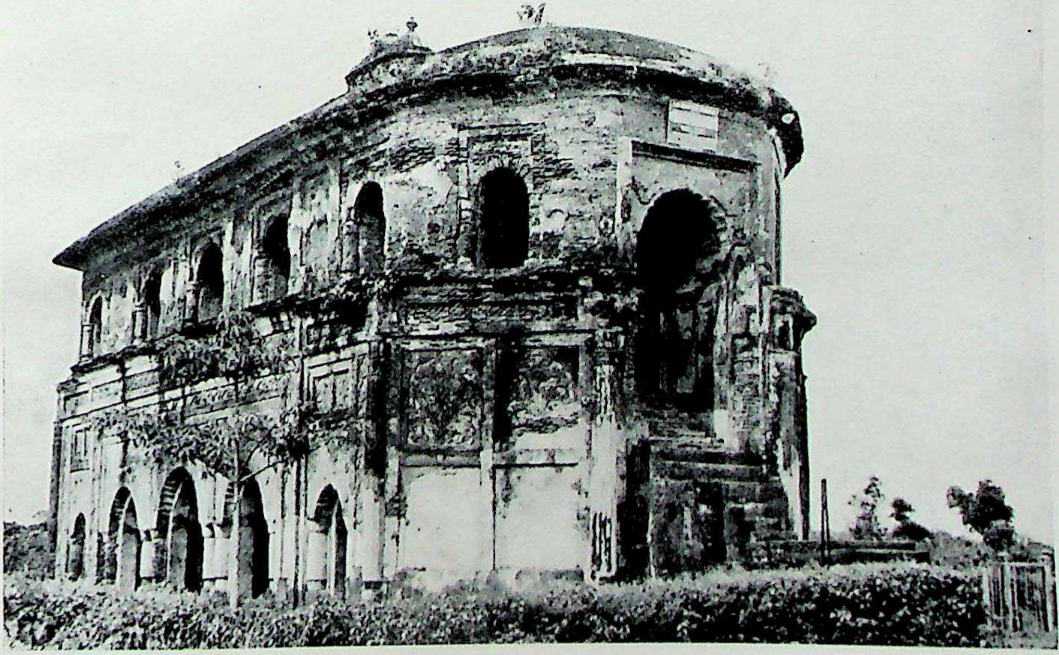

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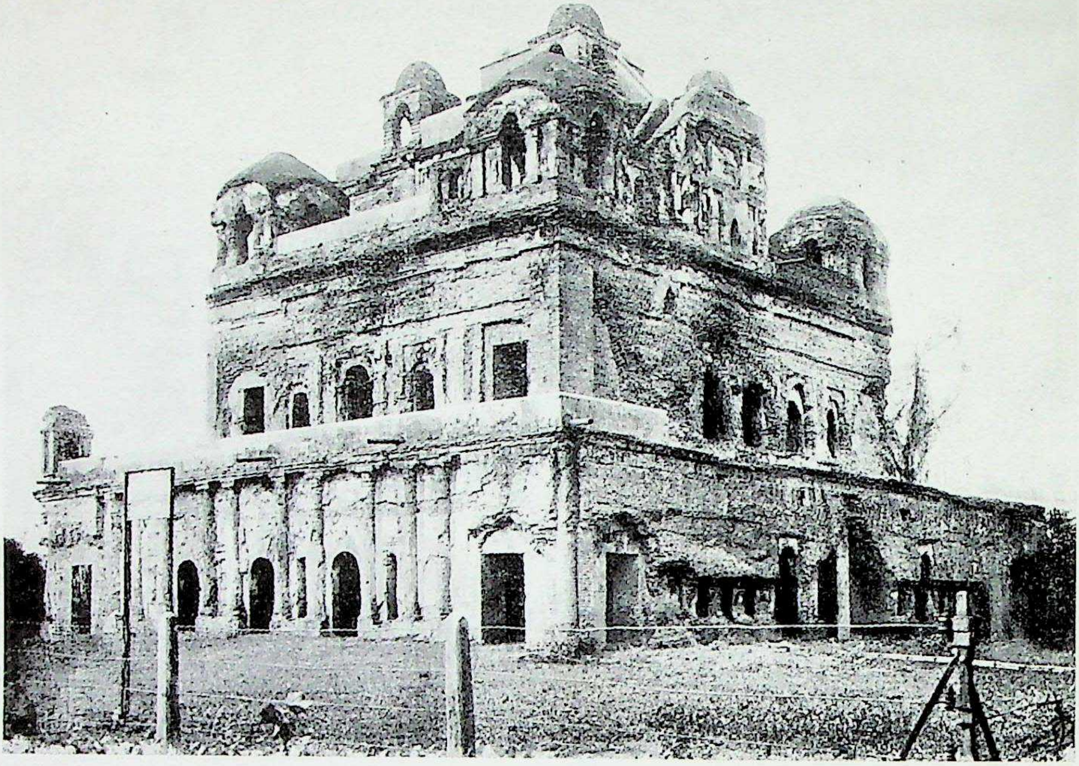

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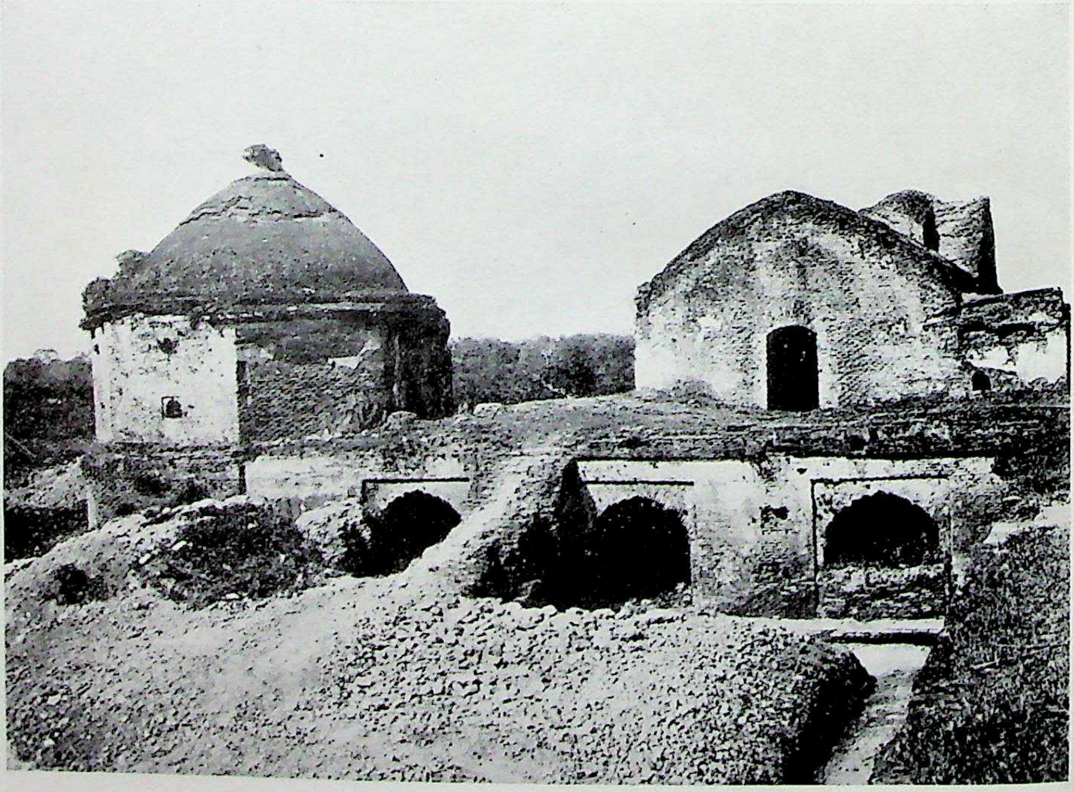

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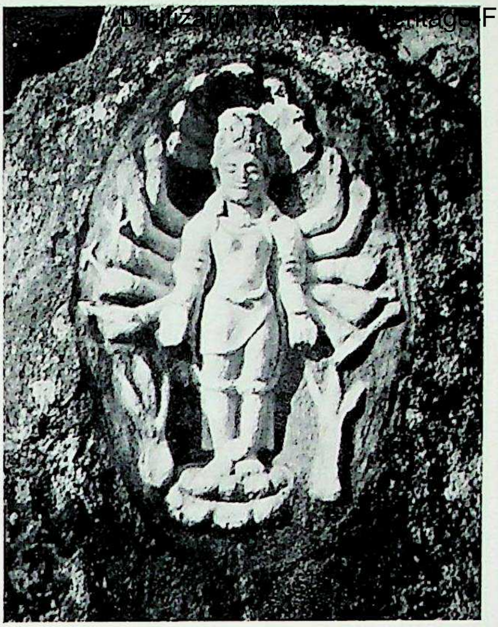

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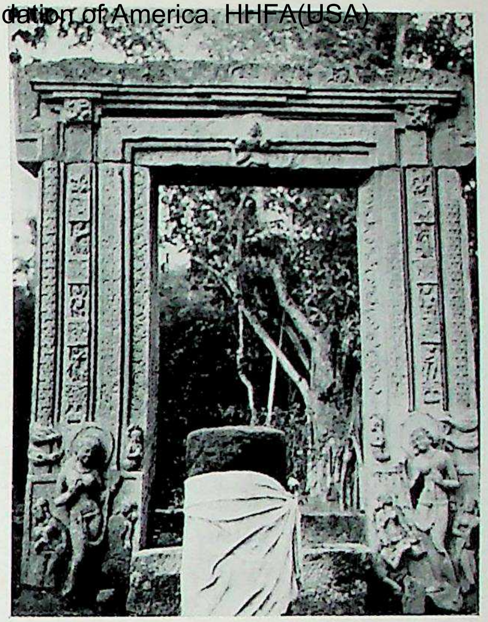

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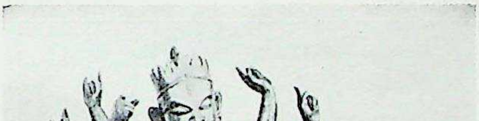

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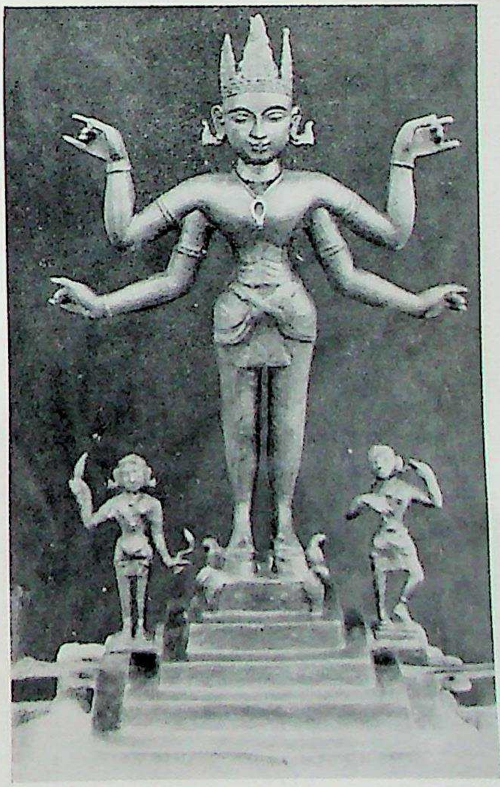

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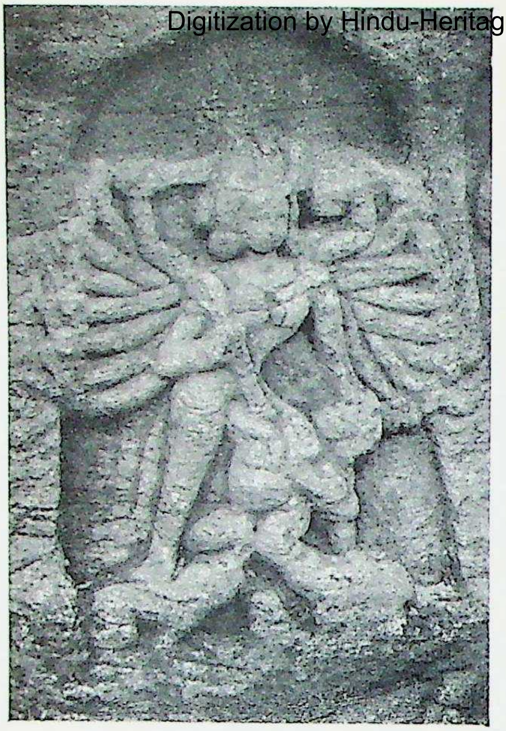

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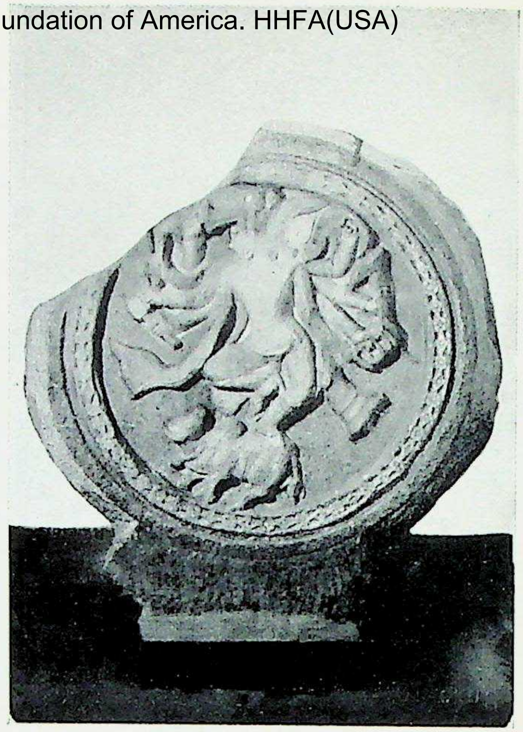

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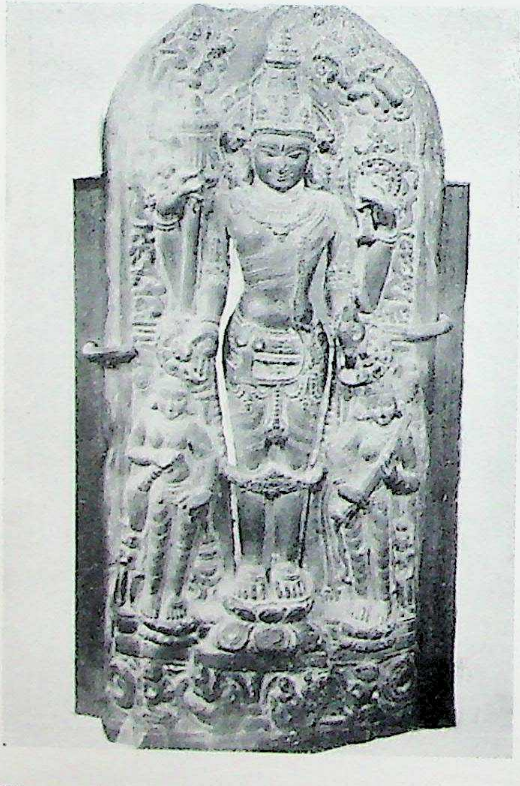

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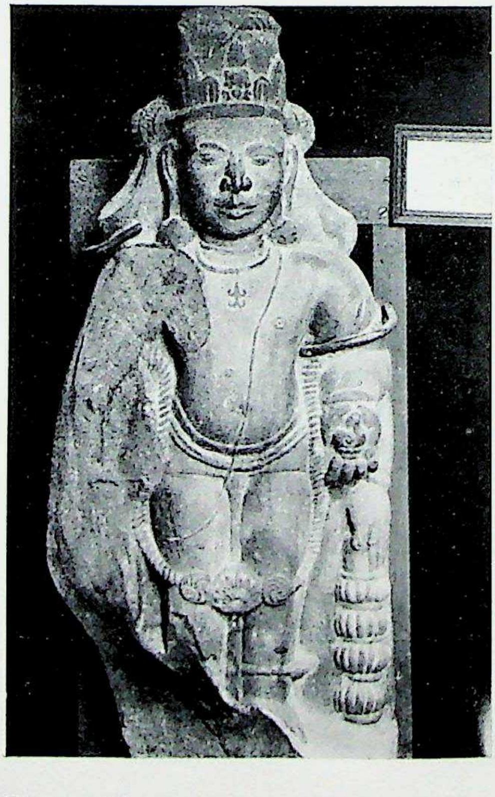

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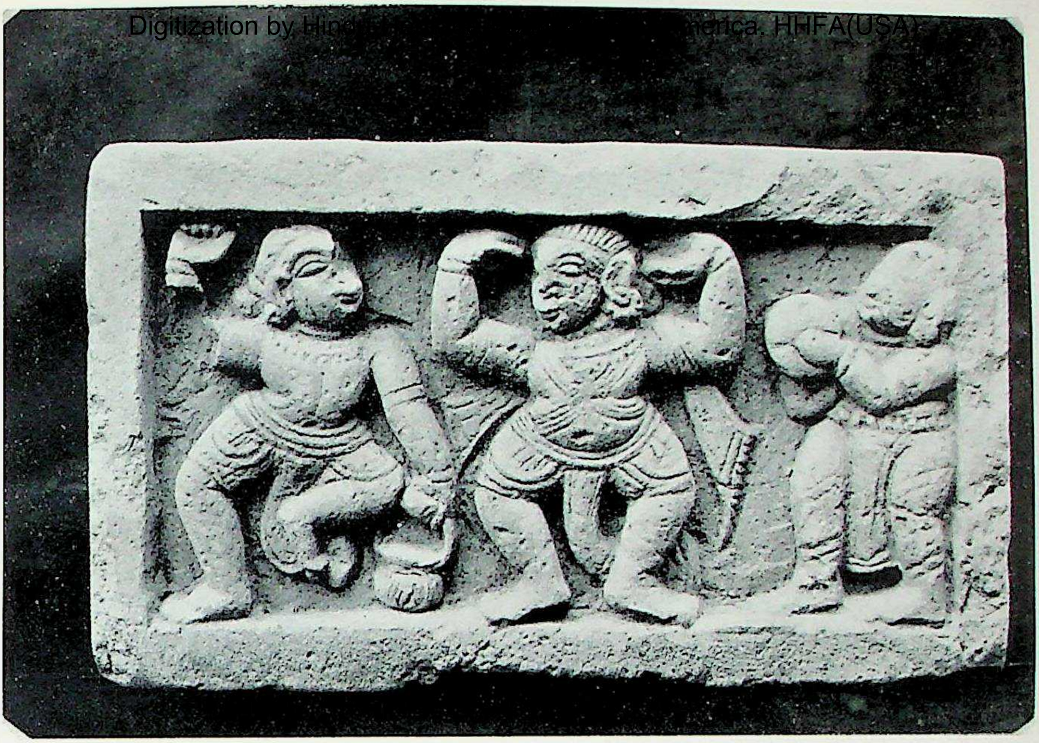

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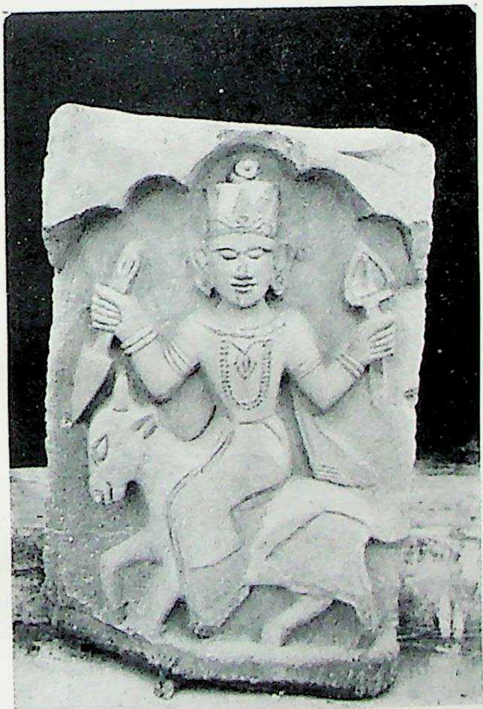

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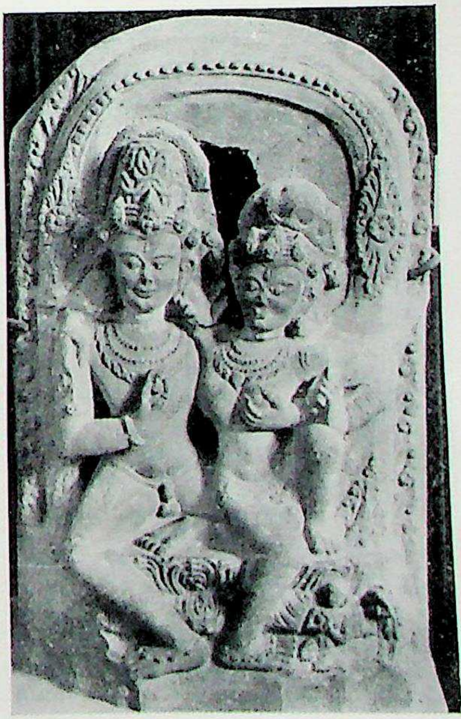

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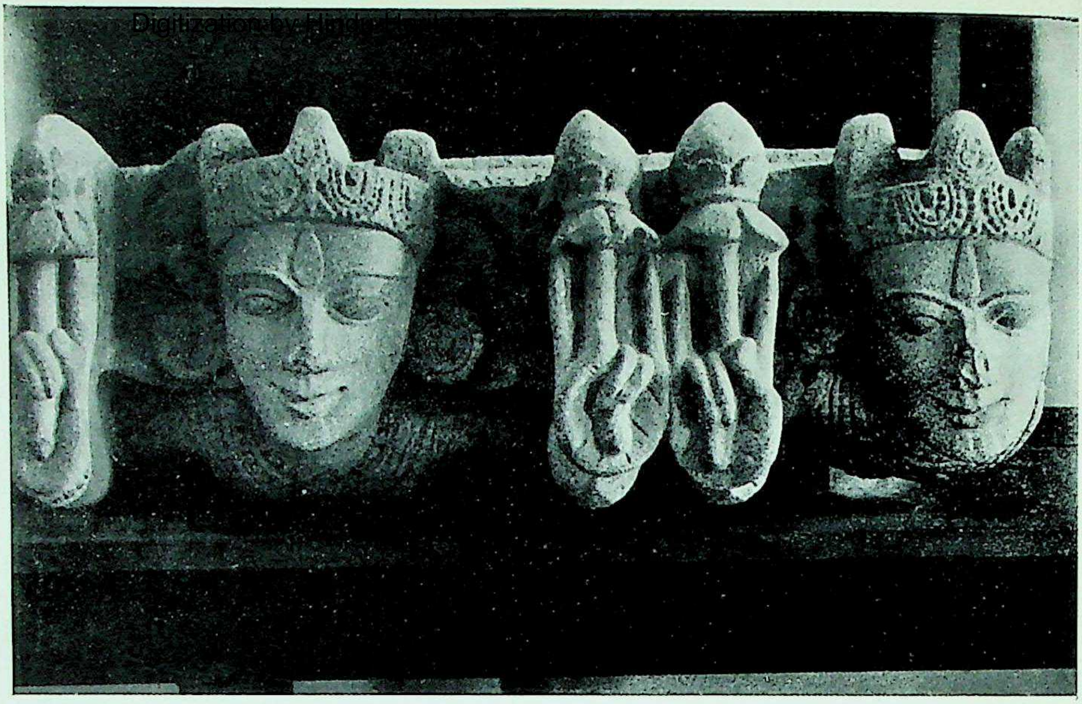

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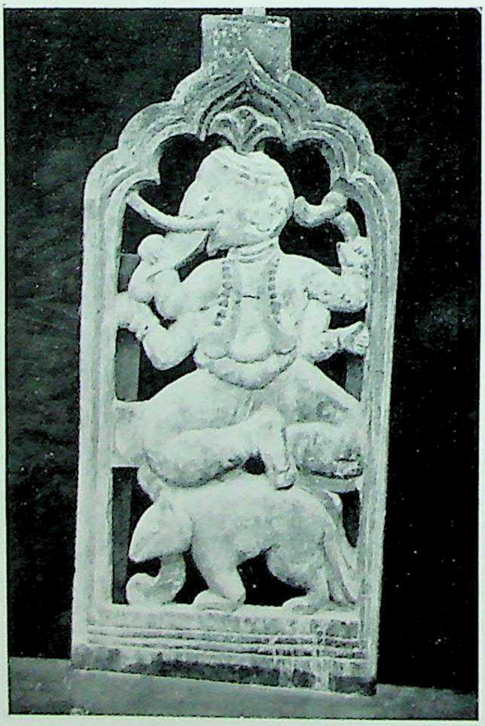

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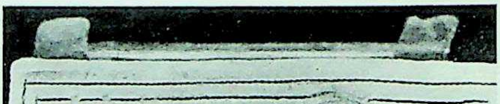

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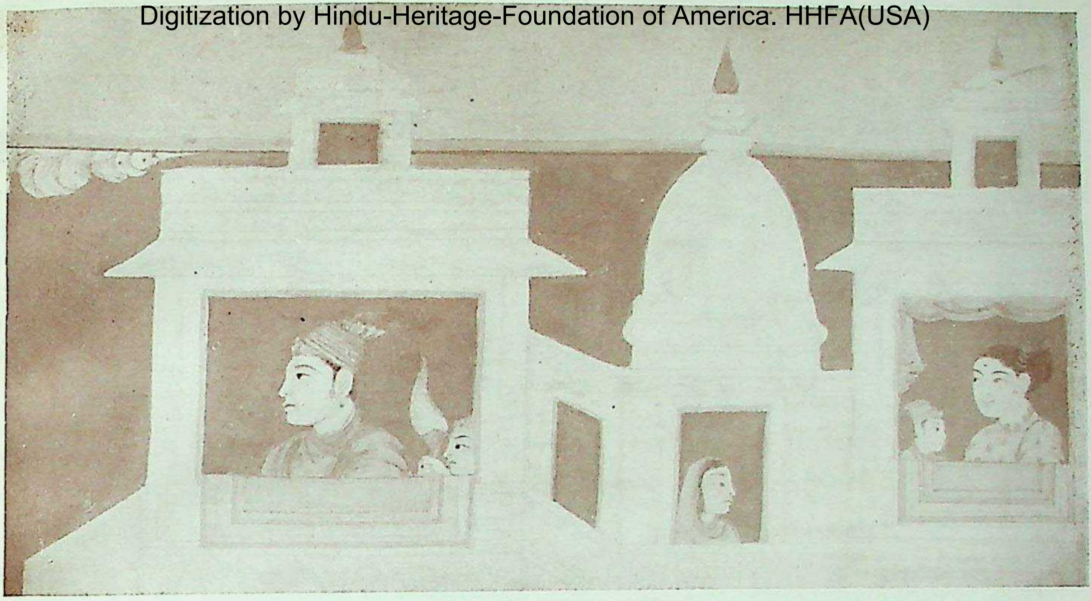

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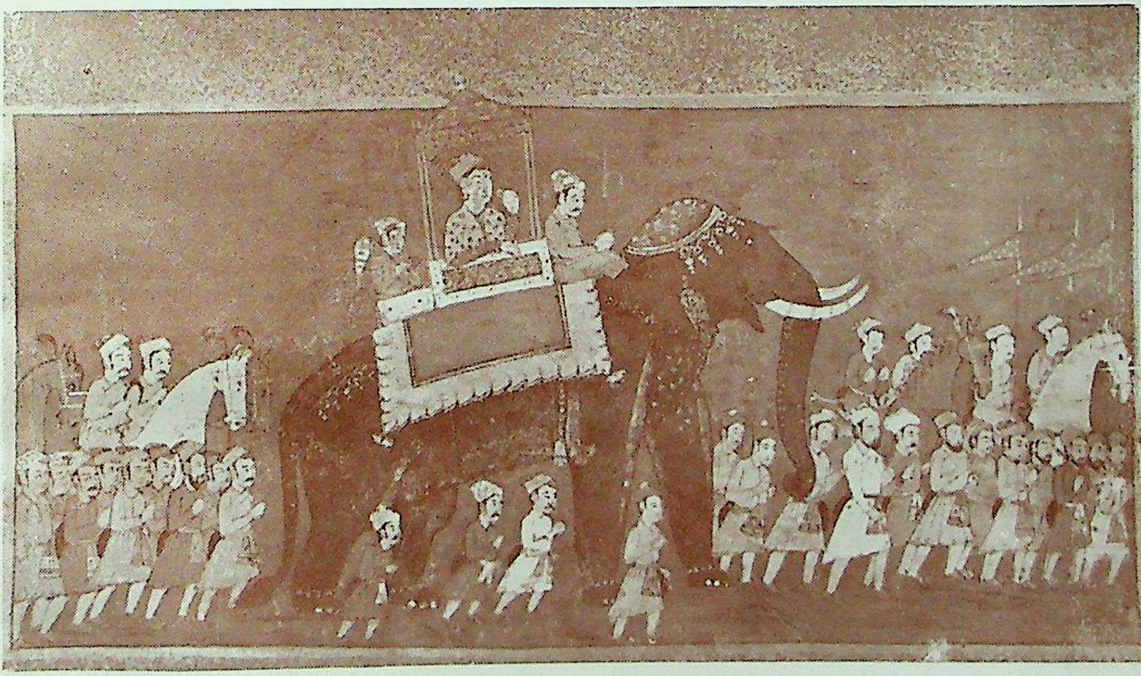

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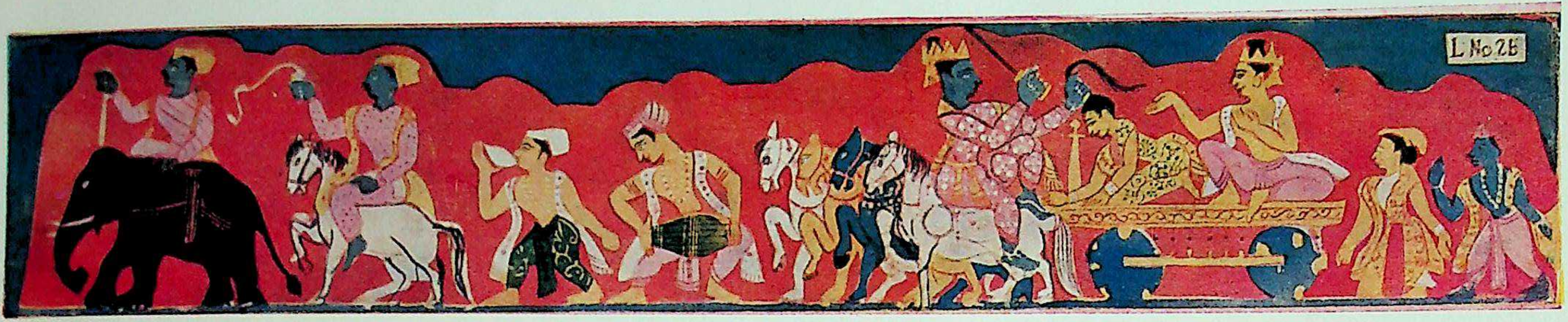

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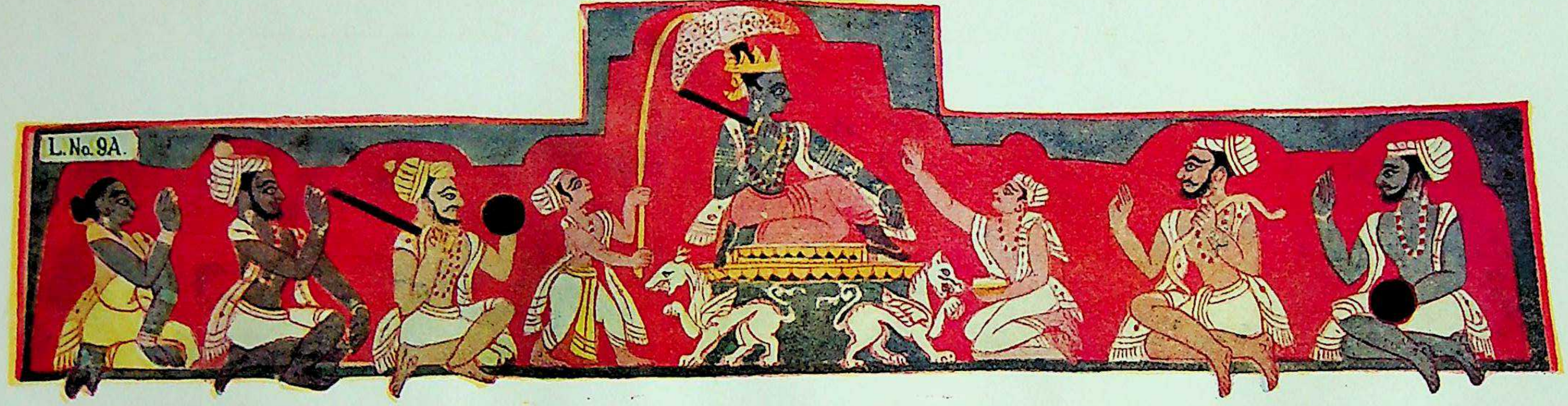

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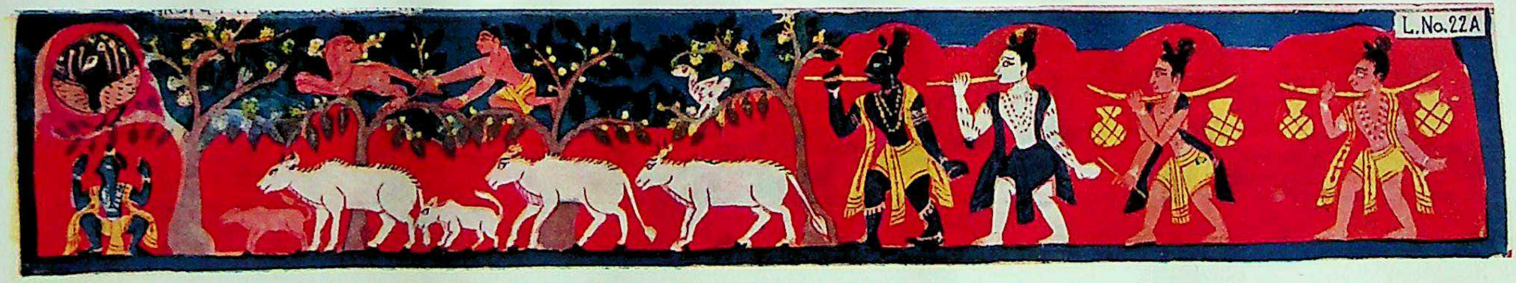

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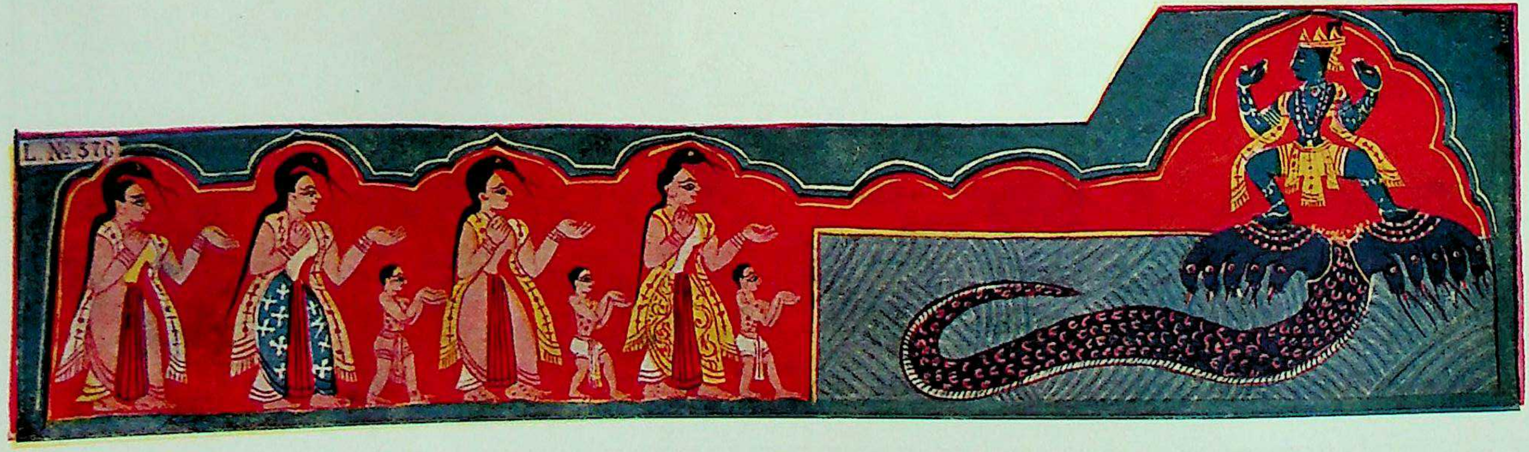

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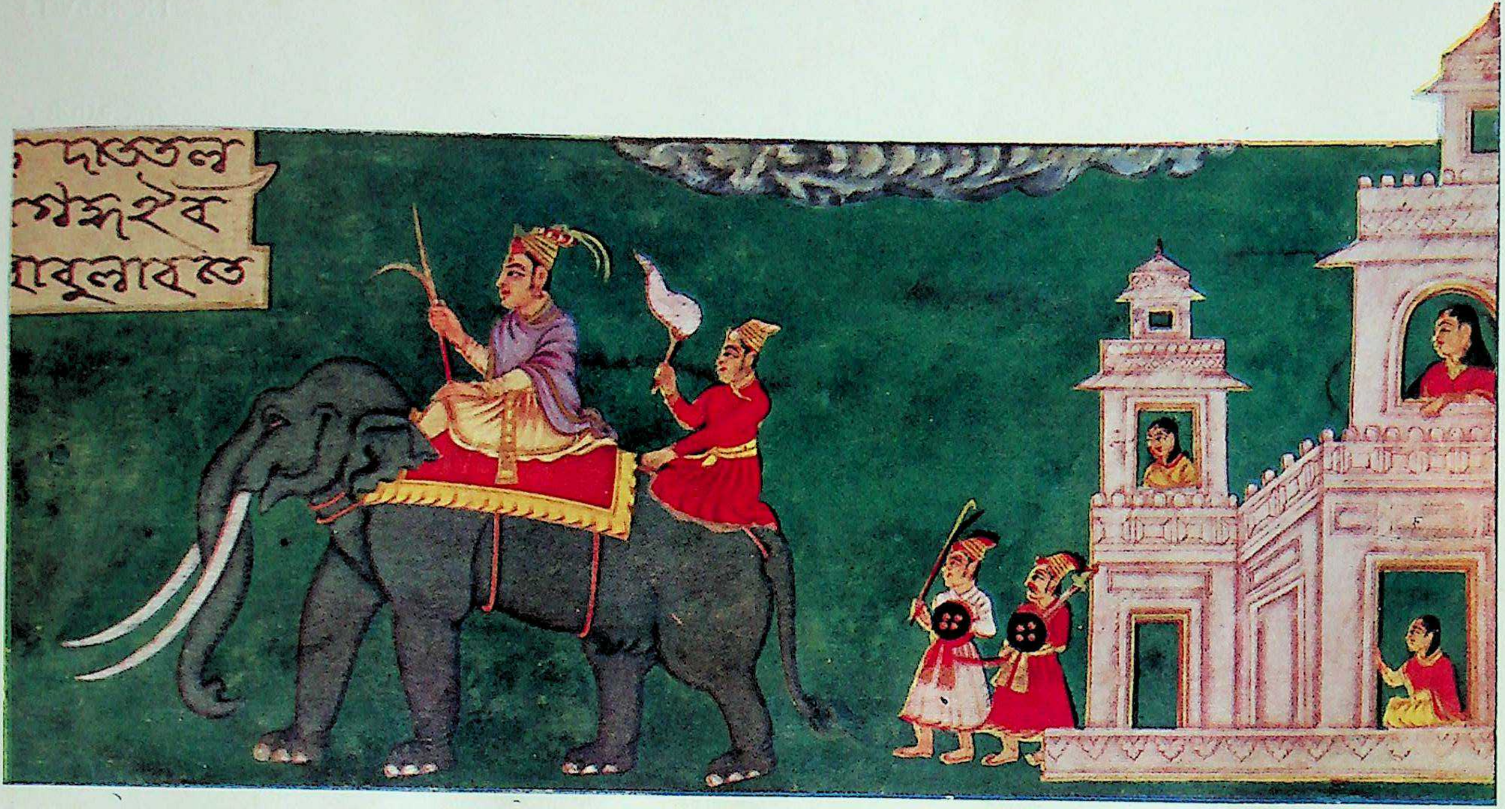
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Figure 30.

PLATE XII

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Scholars who kindly contributed their papers to this Souvenir. We are indebted to the authorities of the Assam State Museum, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, and to Messrs. Dutta Barua and Company, Gauhati, for their kind permission to use some of the illustrations given in the plates. Our sincere thanks are also due to all who in any way rendered assistance in the preparation and publication of this volume.

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